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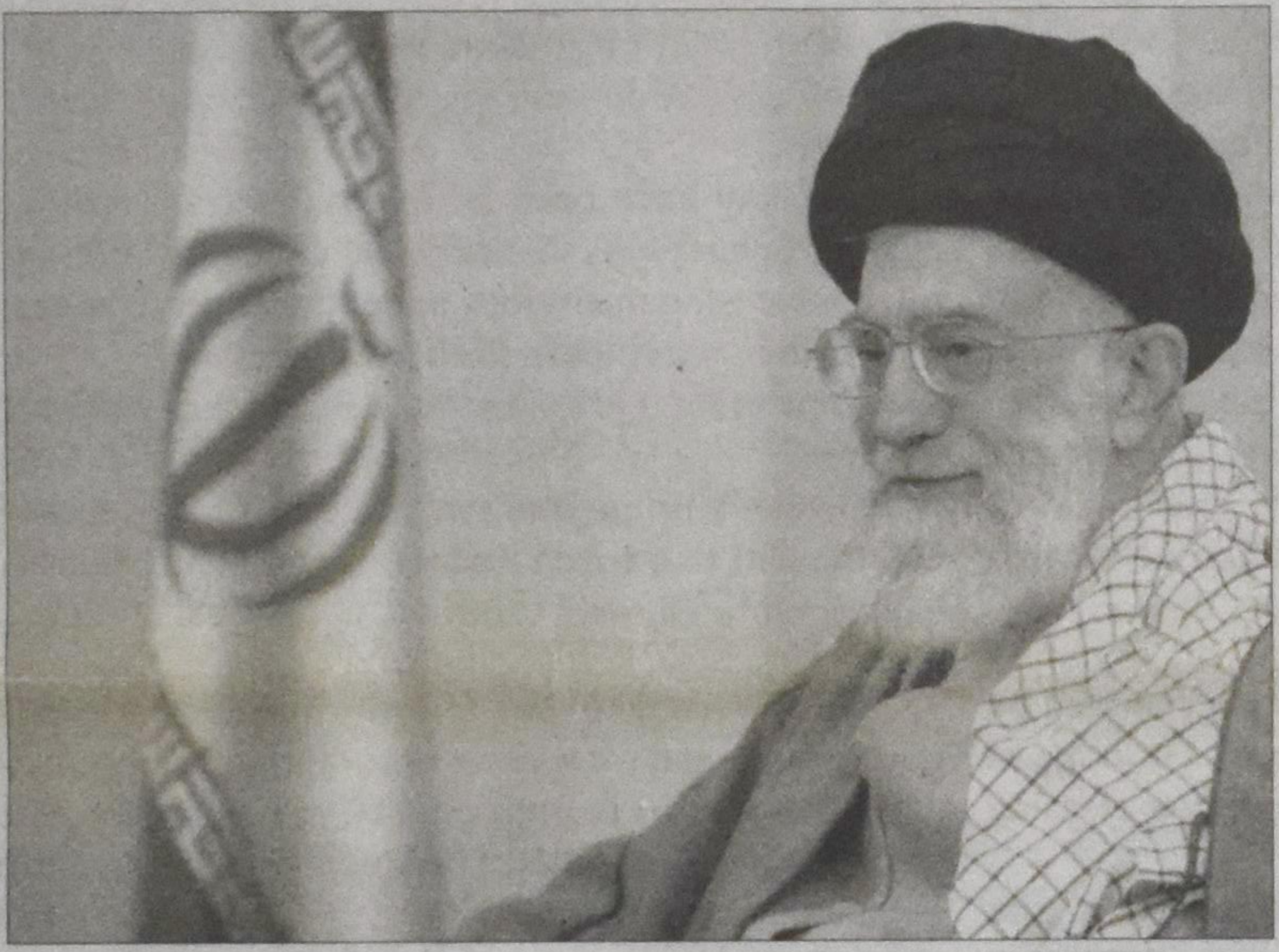
62nd year of publication

Iran: from dialogue to missile threat

Harry der Nederlanden

One week President Ahmadinejad was assuring the world that Iran had no intention of attacking Israel or the US installations in the region and calling for dialogue. The next Iran released pictures of missile tests with a warning that these could easily reach Israel and US bases in the Middle East.

Is Iran sending contradictory messages? Is it acting erratically? Or are different factions pushing different agendas within the country? Have the missile tests increased the danger of a military confrontation with Israel, one that would surely draw in the US?



According to many commentators, there are indeed hardliners and moderates in Iran. The former would keep Iran isolated from Western influence and they care little about the negative impact that harsher sanctions would have on the Iranian economy. Prosperity, as the hardliners see it, only tends to undermine traditional Islam. While the moderates see no reason Iran shouldn't have its own nuclear technology, they realize harsher sanctions could mean miserable times for many Iranians and they see the advantages of dialogue and negotiations.

However, Iran's seemingly contradictory actions may also issue from a single coherent policy. Ayatola Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, believes that bowing to pressure only invites more pressure, said Karim Sadjadpour, an expert on Iran interviewed in *Foreign Policy* magazine. So it makes sense from this perspective to demonstrate that the call for dialogue is not motivated by weakness or a signal that Iran is backing down. It wants to show it is not at all intimidated by the US.

The US as well as Europe have been threatening to increase sanctions against Iran if it does not abandon its nuclear program; in fact the US has said that it cannot and will not tolerate a nuclear Iran and that it will not rule out military action. There has also been much discussion in the press about the possibility of an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. A good deal of the discussion about the likelihood of a US attack on Iran over the last year has come from publications eager to make the Bush administration look more belligerent than it is. Most experts on the region don't take talk of a US attack on Iran very seriously. Neither do Iran's leaders, except when it suits their purposes to stir up their citizenry against the Great Satan US.

The US already finds itself badly overextended in Iraq and Afghanistan. Support for the Iraq war is very low and support for an even broader engagement in the region would be far lower still. So military threats issued against Iran sound rather hollow. Moreover, a preemptive strike against Iran might well trigger retaliation against Israel and an escalation that would ignite the entire region at a time when things seem to be settling down in Iraq.

The scenario of a surgical strike by the Israelis that would take out Iran's nuclear facilities and restore the status quo also seems far fetched. Unlike the strike of several years ago, Iran's nuclear capacity cannot be destroyed in attack on a single facility, and today Iran has a much great capability of taking out Israeli planes and striking back.

An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* warned that Israel could not afford "to wait for Iranian power to grow much larger." It called for the US to get much tougher with Iran; however, it is easy to talk tough, but what do you do if the "enemy" (particularly the hardliners) doesn't wither under tough talk but is strengthened by it at home?

How big of a threat is Iran to the peace of the region? Some commentators ascribe to Iran similar ambitions once harbored by Saddam Hussein of gobbling up some of its neighbors to establish an empire, in this case a conservative Shiite empire. That is, of course, mere speculation. Iran's neighbors may have something to say about that.

As things stand, if Iran launched an attack against Israel in an attempt to wipe it from the map (as Ahmadinejad once said), Iran knows that it, too, would be in danger of being wiped off the map. Israel has nuclear weapons that it would surely use in such an eventuality, and the US would not stand idly by. One can imagine Iran taking such a step only if one assumes that the country is ruled by mad fanatics.

A nuclear Iran would certainly be hard to live with, but the time has passed that this can prevented by preemptive military action. Even sanctions might not work, but they have a better chance of working if they are accompanied by talks and negotiations. Of course, the Iranians have shown themselves adept at engaging in talks while going ahead with their own program anyway, so we must not delude ourselves that they can surely be made "to see reason".

In the end, we may well have no choice but to live with a nuclear Iran and to practice the kind of containment that once characterized the so-called Cold War.

Why everything costs more

JOHANNESBURG (IRIN) – A rough guide as to why food prices keep going up.

What is the crisis?

For the first time since 1973, the world has been hit by a combination of record high food and fuel prices. The price of oilseeds and grains, such as wheat and maize, has doubled since January 2006, with over 60 percent of the hike taking place since January 2008, according to the World Bank. Rice more than tripled between January and May 2008.

Prices have begun to fall as the 2008 crop is being harvested, but recent floods in US states producing maize and soya-beans, and poor weather conditions in Australia have slowed the decline.

Since 2001, oil has rocketed from US$20 a barrel to an unprecedented $140. The World Bank says oil prices are now higher than any time in the last century, not only pushing up the price of food in poor countries importing staple grains and fuel, but also eroding their capacity to buy food.

Why have prices shot up suddenly?

The short answer is that global cereal stocks have not kept pace with growing demand, and neither has the oil supply. Stocks of cereals have been declining worldwide since 2000, while demand has been increasing at two to three percent per year.

In the last two years, cereal stocks have fallen to levels last seen in the 1970s for two main reasons:

See **Food costs** *on page 2*

News

Pakistan turns to force against militants

Mian Ridge

New Delhi – Pakistan's paramilitary forces launched a decisive offensive against Islamic militants encircling the strategically important city of Peshawar in early July – an indication that the new government is turning to military action after focusing, until now, on negotiation.

Troops from the Frontier Corps bolstered by tanks, armored personnel carriers, and helicopters cleared militants from the mountainous Khyber tribal area just outside Peshawar in the first major military operation since Pakistan's new government came to power in March.

The offensive has highlighted the new government's struggle to find a clear strategy for dealing with militants. While it has never discounted a major military strike, it has focused on negotiating truces with militants, even while their spread has caused mounting alarm.

Indeed, some observers have speculated that the government used the Frontier Corps to create the impression that this was a law-and-order exercise, rather than a military one.

The United States fears peace talks have given Taliban and Al Qaeda-linked militants more space to operate along the border with Afghanistan.

But analysts say that while the government has turned to military deployment, it will continue to pursue peace talks. "The strategy is the same, but the modus operandi has changed," says Ikram Sehgal, a defense analyst and editor of Pakistan's Defense Journal.

Gateway to the Khyber Pass

The threat to Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier Province, clearly warranted military action, say analysts.

Pakistani soldiers

The city guards the approach to the Khyber Pass, an essential conduit for US and NATO forces fighting in Afghanistan. To lose this most strategic of cities to the militants would be a disaster for Pakistan's new government.

The offensive also came as US assistant secretary of State for South and Central Asian affairs, Richard Boucher, arrived in Pakistan for talks with the government.

"What do you do?" asks Khalid Aziz, a Peshawar-based analyst and chair of the Regional Institute of Policy Research and Training, a think tank. "Warlords are emerging like mushrooms all over the place; most of their money is generated by the bountiful Afghan poppy … it looks as if these people [the militants] are clearing the routes in the area."

Regarding the future of peace talks, he says: "We will have to pursue both courses and keep our eyes wide open. There's a growing realization among political groups here that the Taliban won't begin peace talks – but some members of their rank and file may be open to them."

Indeed, on Saturday, the Pakistani Taliban commander Bai-tullah Mehsud suspended negotiations with the government over its use of force in the tribal areas.

Dangerously close

In recent days, there have been reports that the Taliban and other militant groups were dangerously close to taking Peshawar, converging from north and south, even though Peshawar houses the main Army garrison for the entire northwest.

"The Taliban are no longer at the gates of Peshawar, they're inside, making their presence felt in the largest city in the NWFP (North West Frontier Province)," reported the *Daily Times* newspaper.

This may have been an overstatement, but Mr. Sehgal says that criminal elements were increasing operations under the cover of religious activities in Peshawar, "and the government can't just stand back and let that happen."

Pakistan's prime minister, Yousef Raza Gilani, said that tribal leaders had broken truces with vicious criminal activities: public hangings, kidnapping, and arson.

"No government can afford a parallel government, and we will never compromise the country's sovereignty, dignity, and self-respect," the Associated Press of Pakistan quoted him as saying.

On June 21, a convoy of armed militants drove into Peshawar and kidnapped 16 men from the city's tiny Christian community. The men were later freed.

Some observers say action on such criminals was long overdue.

The weekend's offensive targeted the Lashkar-e-Islam, or Army of Islam, a movement that was reported to have taken over huge swathes of the Khyber Pass. Forces bombed the house of its leader, Mangal Bagh, in the town of Bara, about 28 miles southeast of Khyber's main town, Landikotal, on Saturday. Mr. Bagh had left home for the remote Tirah valley before the attack.

Though he propounds a hard-line form of Islam, and in recent days had sent his men into Peshawar to threaten music and DVD shop owners, Bagh is understood to have little contact with Pakistan's Taliban.

He is, however, thought to have links with the Vice and Virtue Movement, a militant faction that is believed to have sent forces into Afghanistan to fight coalition soldiers.

On Monday, June 30, an explosion destroyed the house of a Vice and Virtue Movement's leader, killing six people, although a military official claimed the blast occurred when explosives stored at the house went off by accident.

Watching cities

Meanwhile, given the threat of militant reprisals, security has been stepped up in Pakistan's major cities, including Islamabad, where an unexplained blast caused panic on Monday morning.

Reuters reported that Mr. Mehsud predicted, in a telephone conversation, that the offensive in Khyber would be followed by further operations against militant groups in other parts of Pakistan's northwest – and he threatened retaliation.

"I am warning that the fire will not only burn in tribal areas and Frontier Province, it will engulf Punjab and Sindh also," Reuters quoted Mehsud as saying.

Mian Ridge is a correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Food costs *continued from page 1*

firstly, major wheat-producing countries such as Australia suffered droughts in 2006 and 2007; secondly, the hike in fuel prices saw the US and many European countries offer subsidies to their farmers to grow grain for biofuel. The switch from growing food to growing fuel pushed up prices by 30 to 70 percent, depending on which study you read.

Some analysts have blamed high food prices on the burgeoning economies of China, India and some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where more people can now afford to include meat and other animal products in their diet, which in turn has driven up the demand for grains used as feed.

However, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) says recent high commodity prices do not seem to have originated in these emerging markets: neither China nor India are big cereal importers in the 2007/08 season. In fact, China is exporting maize and India's wheat imports are relatively small.

Various food analysts say the production of grains has dropped because of rising chemical fertilizer prices, which have doubled and even tripled in some parts of the world, making it unaffordable to most farmers in developing countries.

Other analysts have attributed low cereal stocks to the cumulative effect of changes in the agricultural policies of developed countries, particularly in Europe, where farm subsidies have been shrinking, and a drop in investment in agricultural research to develop high-yield varieties since the 1990s.

But the price spikes recorded in 2008, particularly in rice, have been linked to export restrictions imposed by rice-producing countries, including India, China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Egypt, which together supplied around 40 percent of global rice exports in 2007, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Didn't anyone see the crisis coming?

Since 2006 the FAO has warned of a possible food price crisis in its periodic updates on global cereal stocks.

What has been the fallout of the crisis?

The impact of increasingly expensive food has been wide-ranging, deepening poverty levels and pushing even more people into poverty. According to a recent World Bank study, at least another 105 million across the world will become poor.

Simulations in this study suggest that in Africa alone nearly another 30 million people will fall into poverty: in Sierra Leone the food crisis has raised poverty by three percentage points, to 69 percent; in Djibouti, rising food prices over the past three years are estimated to have increased extreme poverty from 40 percent to 54 percent.

Various UN agencies have warned that unaffordable food could drive up the number of undernourished people in the world – already at 800 million – while poor people have begun skipping meals or switching to cheaper and lower quality cereals, affecting their health.

A recent FAO assessment in Somalia found that 2.6 million people – approximately 35 percent of the population, of which more than half are children – had been affected by a nutrition crisis caused by drought and prolonged conflict. The number of people needing humanitarian assistance in Somalia could reach an estimated 3.5 million – half the total population – by the end of 2008.

According to the World Bank, even stable, high-growth countries are not immune to the damaging effects of escalating food prices on child nutrition. In India, for instance, 47 percent of children are stunted – double the rate in sub-Saharan Africa, where 24 percent experience delayed development – and nearly five times that of China, where just over nine percent of children are stunted.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) says 1.5 to 1.8 million more children in India are at risk of malnourishment as households cut back on meals or switch to less nutritious foods to cope with rising prices.

Expensive food and fuel have also had

Food costs *cont. on page 3*

News

Principalities & Powers

David T. Koyzis

Tweedledee and Tweedledum

When I was a young man trying to find my own political identity within the American context, I would sometimes come across the following statement: the differences between Democrats and Republicans amount to little more than those between Lewis Carroll's famous characters Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Both parties are self-interested players out to win power at the expense of the other while differing with each other scarcely at all in matters of principle. True, one might hear politicians speak of a "Republican philosophy" or a "Democratic philosophy," but these were usually expressed in terms of approaches to specific issues thought to separate the two parties.

This somewhat cynical assessment resonated with me at the time. My own parents had more or less consistently voted Republican, though Barry Goldwater's 1964 candidacy for the US presidency put this loyalty to the test. By contrast, my aunt and her husband voted Democrat, mostly because of the role Democratic President Harry Truman had played in aiding the anticommunist forces during the Greek Civil War of the late 1940s. Obviously their divergent allegiances involved no great clash of principles, but merely differing pragmatic assessments of who would best protect the legitimate interests of the American people and the free world.

This was in the days when economic issues were assumed to separate the two parties. The Democrats appealed to blue-collar workers, labour union members, urban Catholics, white southerners and, paradoxically, black northerners. The Republican support base included small business people, affluent northeasterners, farmers, and small-town protestants in the north.

But then, as I wrote in this space two months ago, the support bases of the two parties began to polarize around the so-called social issues, such as abortion and sexuality. The traditionally religious coalesced within the Republican fold, while secularists of various sorts gravitated to the Democrats, especially after 1972. After 1980 the Democratic Party became monolithically pro-choice on abortion, thereby alienating increasing numbers of Catholics and Southern Baptists, once the core of its support base.

This polarization of the two parties would appear to make the Tweedledee/Tweedledum comment less accurate now than it was three decades ago. Since then many Christians have come to conclude that, whatever their reservations about the Republican Party, it is much less hostile to their moral commitments than is the Democratic Party in its current configuration. This serves in large measure to explain the back-to-back victories of Ronald Reagan and of George W. Bush two decades apart.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the Tweedledee/Tweedledum analogy still holds, and this concerns the two parties' view of the state as a political community. Both lack a strong conviction that the state is a community of citizens and government called to do public justice. Both at least tacitly follow the historic liberal belief that government's origin lies in the will or consent of the people as expressed in an initial founding contract. Neither Democrats nor Republicans can manage to set aside the notion that, as the *Declaration of Independence* puts it, government "deriv[es its] just powers from the consent of the governed," who might then alter or abolish it if they believe it not to have fulfilled the ends for which they established it.

Whatever the differences between Barack Obama and John McCain, neither is likely to depart radically from the larger ideological framework set by the American founders over two centuries ago. Yet they and their parties will need to rethink their larger political philosophies if they hope to do public justice to the diversity of interests in their country and elsewhere.

David T. Koyzis teaches political science at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, and retains United States citizenship, along with the right to vote in that country.

Food costs *continued from page 2*

political fallout: since 2007, high prices have sparked violent protests in at least 17 countries, mostly in Africa; earlier in 2008, the government of Haiti fell after week-long protests.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which is committed to promoting democracy and assisting developing countries, noted that each 10 percent increase in the prices of cereals adds nearly $4.5 billion to the import bills of poorer countries.

An FAO study recently noted that at least seven countries – Gambia, Liberia, Mauritania, Niger, Zimbabwe, Jordan and Moldova – which have all chalked up high levels of debt – could be forced to spend as much as two percent of their gross domestic product on importing food. Most of these countries are already struggling with chronic hunger, so soaring food costs hold the threat of political instability.

Surely higher food prices benefit small-scale farmers?

Yes, logically they should. But very few subsistence farmers in Africa produce surplus food, and are mostly net buyers. Simulated studies by FAO found that rural households in countries where land was not equitably distributed – which is the case in most developing countries – would be worst affected.

The World Bank has also found that although farmers who produce surplus food might be better protected, even they might not benefit from the food price surge because the cost of inputs like fuel, fertilizer and transportation often rose faster than world market prices for food.

Agriculture experts say that unless governments subsidize inputs, poverty levels in rural households could deepen, and the prospects for beefing up global cereal stocks look bleak. The World Bank has called for subsidies aimed at poor and small-scale farmers for a limited period to boost yields, as part of a package that should include investment in extension, research and rural infrastructure.

When will food prices come down?

High prices may boost production in 2008, which in turn may push down prices, provided there are no natural disasters. But any major expansion of agricultural land in the short term is unlikely, says FAO, and any increase in plantings of one crop would need to occur at the expense of another. So, while the price of a certain food commodity might fall, the prices of others might increase.

Short-term price forecasts for food commodities are difficult because they are linked to other markets, such as energy. A recent FAO/OECD medium-term outlook for major agricultural commodities said prices were likely to remain high for the next decade.

Can the situation be turned around?

Many agriculture experts are pushing for a new "Green Revolution", which doubled cereal production between 1970 and 1995 in South Asia. Money and investment in developing high-yielding varieties of maize, wheat and rice, combined with access to pesticides, irrigation and fertilizer, could have a dramatic impact.

But this would require huge amounts of money: between $15 and $20 billion a year, according to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Aid agencies and other non-governmental organisations are lobbying the G8 and other leaders meeting in Japan this week to beef up investment in agriculture in developing countries.

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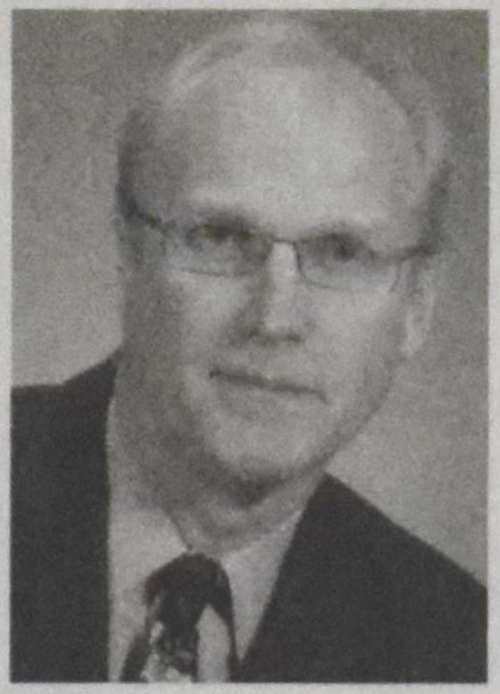

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Guest editorial

Fight against the atomization of our society!

Bert Witvoet

In one of my workshops for educators in South Africa last April, I made reference to an article by Stuart Fowler, an Australian educator, who contrasted the dominant Western view of the human person with the dominant African view. Fowler writes, "In the dominant Western view individuality defines the person.... By contrast, traditional Africans think that the social group defines the person; what is central to the human person is not individuality but membership in a community." ("Communities, Organizations and People" in the June 1993 issue of *Pro Rege*.)

I told the educators that we Westerners could learn about community from Africans. We tend to reduce everything to the individual. We live isolated lives. We dare not enter each other's homes without making an appointment or without being invited. Parents are losing connections with their children. And children have no sense of loyalty to the family and are not willing to submit to the authority of parents and teachers.

Judicial interference

This became painfully clear again this month when a 12-year-old girl in Quebec took her father to court because he had grounded her from an end-of-year school excursion. Apparently the girl had disobeyed her father about her use of the Internet – she had posted indecent pictures of herself on the Web. The father decided to show his daughter that her disobedience was unacceptable. He grounded her. The girl, supported by her non-custodial mother and a willing lawyer, tried to have her father's decision overturned. The judge who heard her case agreed with the girl that the father's punishment had been too harsh, and that he had robbed her of her "right" to attend an important school event.

Here's an extreme example of how the dominant Western view of personhood is reduced to the will of an individual, in this case, a pubescent individual with an overdose of rebellious hormones. The judge in question glibly dismantled the family structure and reduced the issue of disobedience to a human right. The 12-year-old did not take her identity from the community, from her family, but she took it from the absolute authority of her own individual will.

The force of tradition

I did tell my South African friends that their situation is not perfect either. They could learn something from the West about freedom. I used as example our four married sons. I told them that all of them can and do cook meals. They all take part in household duties. They all take turns changing the baby's diaper. One of our sons' weekly task is to do the laundry. So I asked the men in the group, "How would you like to change your baby's diaper or do the laundry or even sweep the driveway?" The response was a collective expression of horror and a downright rejection of such a notion. "What would the neighbours say? They would think that we had married a witch who had certain powers over us." They admitted that they took their identity from the community.

Even the women did not necessarily think it was a good idea. The South African women we met are used to preparing the meal, serving the meal, praying a blessing on the meal, and then withdrawing into the kitchen to eat their own serving. "How free are you to do what makes sense?" I asked. "Today both men and women often work out of the home, also in South Africa. Doesn't it make sense to share some of the household duties?" "Yes, but that goes against our tradition!"

My wife, Alice, challenged the principal of a Christian school when she questioned why a husband we saw walking on the side of the road with his wife, allowed her to carry a heavy load of branches, while he airily trotted along, holding an axe. My wife suggested that he carry the heavy load. "That's not allowed," he responded matter-of-factly. "He cuts the branches; she carries them."

No communal taboos

But when I read again in a North American paper that a bunch of teenaged girls from Gloucester, Massachusetts, agreed to all get pregnant and then raise their kids together, I thought, "Maybe African society is not so bad after all with its traditional mores."

I suppose one could say that the pregnancy agreement displays a slight sense of community. The girls, allegedly, hope to raise the kids together. Not that I put much stock in that hope of raising kids together. They are not mature enough to form a true community. Besides, what is their idea of family and fatherhood? Where is the notion that children need to be born out of the committed love relationship of a man and a woman? One of the Gloucester girls apparently got pregnant through a homeless guy in town. Having babies is not the same as going to Disneyland together or throwing a party for grad night.

The two separate incidents named above indicate what's wrong with North American society. It shows the breakdown of authority, the isolation of children and parents, the notion of rights without responsibilities, the lack of communal taboos, the breakdown of family, the focus on having fun to the point where babies become toys. William Gairdner in *Oh! Oh! Canada* calls it the breakdown of the "molecule" of the traditional family and the "atomization" of society.

What can we do?

As Christians we need to sit up and take notice. We need to maintain or create an alternative to the dominant popular culture more than ever before. Not that we will entirely escape the breakdown of community. Statistics about Christians in America say that 40 per cent of their marriages fail. The fact that the rate of divorce is almost as high among Christians as it is in the rest of society tells us that "the world is too much with us." Marriages begun with the best of intentions don't seem to hold together in a society that has removed too many support structures and offers too many distractions and alternatives.

We need to find new ways of being communities. Churches can do it by forming small groups and organizing youth activities. Christian schools can focus on being intentional communities by working with a common vision, creating an atmosphere of love and trust, and developing an ethos of leadership for service (Gloria Stronks and Doug Blomberg in "How Do We Forge a Community for Learning?"). Families can focus on activities that bring the family together, activities that minimize such isolating practices as watching TV, escaping into the world of the computer and Internet and listening to I-Pods.

Take time to be what?

But above all, we have to slow down the pace of life. We can't build community on the run. We need to take time to reflect and to look at each other. We tend to act as if God made a huge mistake when he created a 24-hour day and night. We think we need more time. We don't. We only need to set our priorities right and take the time that God has made available for doing essential and constructive things. According to a Christian organization called Man in the Mirror, "for every 10 men in your church, 10 are struggling to balance work and family." This, too, says something about the pace of life in North America.

We used to sing the hymn "Take Time to Be Holy," until we decided in our better wisdom that holiness cannot be a part-time job. We are called to be holy all the time, at work and at play. Absolutely! But the intent of the hymn was to say that we need to set aside time for taking stock and nourishing the inner person, because "the world rushes on," says one line in that hymn. So the hymn writer urges us to "speak oft with thy Lord … feed on his Word … make friends with God's children … help those who are weak … be calm in thy soul … each thought and each motive beneath his control." That's not such bad advice, is it? If only the hymn writer had begun his composition with "Take time to be centered!" I know … that still leaves us with the last line: "Thou soon shalt be fitted for service above."

A time for redemption

This June one of our married sons and his wife adopted a nine-month-old baby boy who had been forsaken by his parents. I'd like to think that our son and daughter-in-law have rescued this little guy from a society that is falling apart and have brought it into a community of accountability and love. According to a letter to the editor in the *National Post*, author Alistair MacLeod once wrote: "We are all better when we are loved." So true, especially if that love comes from a Christian couple who is part of a Christian community. That little boy will soon be fitted for service below and will take his identity from his family and from his Christian community in Vancouver, the Lord willing.

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EDITORIAL TEAM & PRODUCTION STAFF

Editor: Harry der Nederlanden editor@christiancourier.ca

Circulation: Rose der Nederlanden rose@christiancourier.ca

Accounts/Advertising Manager: Ineke Medcalf-Strayer ads@christiancourier.ca

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5 Joanna Dr, St. Catharines ON L2N 1V1

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Canada

Commentary

Morgentaler

David Warren

Ottawa – Let me tell my readers about an "epiphany" I once had – a long time ago, yet seemingly yesterday. Some things, especially memories of love, remain vivid for the duration of one's life. This was something that happened when I was seventeen, traveling through India by third class rail.

I had left Howrah Station in Calcutta the day before, bound for Raxaul on the frontier with Nepal. I rode twenty-five hours continuously on an unbelievably hot and crowded train (often thinking I might die of suffocation), to some obscure distant junction. There I changed trains, as instructed, boarding a flatbed, to my relief – with crude siderails and grid of low benches to hold the passengers in place – wonderfully open to the sky. According to the schedule, another twenty hours, making every stop across the state of Bihar.

An atheist at the time, I almost prayed for rain.

In such a carriage, one does not choose a seat. It chooses you. I found myself physically merged with an extended family, consisting of two sisters, their frail-looking husbands, a sprightly grandma, and about fifteen children. The elder sister, sitting high in the middle of the mob, was also quite pregnant. And radiant with joy, the whole journey.

When I say these people were poor, I am describing a phenomenon beyond the comprehension of most North Americans. They had the rags they were wearing, a bedroll or two, a tiffin stack of simple food. (If they had any valuables, they were effectively concealed.) But what they also had was a treasure beyond postmodern understanding. For they had each other.

I was passed a little baby soon after the train moved (so slowly, I thought I could outrun it). A little boy was also set on my left knee; there being nowhere else to put him. Rags were stretched against the scorching sun; a cool breeze puffed them. The magnificent scenery of the Gangetic Plain rolled by in splendour – the little farmer's fields, the galaxy of villages. Chaos at every stop.

Eye contact was made with each member of this family in turn, and I was now fully adopted. Language was unnecessary: I followed the conversation in their eyes. There was some singing; there were some prayers. When mealtime came, I was passed my share – a chapati, with a spoonful of lentils on it.

After a few hours of this, the inexplicable happiness of this extended family had communicated itself to me. I felt an inner exhilaration of belonging, such as I had never felt in the atomized, modern society from which I came; a profound joy in being alive. For these people knew: that life is holy.

"I call heaven and earth to witness this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life."

Yes, this is a sermon. That would be Moses speaking, in the Book of Deuteronomy. I don't think I began to grasp this idea until I was seventeen, riding that flatcar through Bihar: that we choose life, or we choose death; for ourselves, for others. That every instant of life is glorious, and infinitely valuable. That the rags you wear are of no great importance. It is important to live; and living, to rise, towards the Love that made us. "Rise, let us be on our way," in the words of the last Pope.

Like many, many, many Canadians, I took the appointment of Henry Morgentaler to membership in the Order of Canada – proclaimed on "Canada Day" – as a stick in the eye for everything we believe in. As a gratuitous insult to the memory of three million aborted babies.

It was intended as that. The perpetrators of this hateful deed – presenting an abortionist as a model for "humanism" and as a champion of women – knew perfectly well what they were doing. As I had learned even before the event, protocol had been breached in making the appointment. There was no consensus on the appointment committee; the chair, Chief Justice McLachlin, had failed to recuse herself. It was done deceitfully, after the Governor-General's office had assured outraged callers last February that Morgentaler would not be on the list this year. And last weekend, as the rumour spread, a fresh round of outraged callers were being mocked – given the phone number of Campaign Life Coalition by the Rideau Hall switchboard.

The announcement was then delayed – another irregularity – until after the Parliament Hill celebrations, to prevent a large pro-life demonstration from coalescing there. And, instead of denouncing the appointment, our cynical prime minister had "talking points" distributed to his caucus before the fact.

A very dark thing was done, as such things are always done – in a very dark way.

Yet I think it may be for the best, in a longer view of things.

We might often grumble that the "ruling class" in Canada – the smug, self-serving, "progressive" political, legal, academic, and media elites, including that prime example in Rideau Hall – belong to some other world than the one from which they suck taxes. But seldom is there an event so stark, that we see them as they are. The Morgentaler award revealed that to so many Canadians.

David Warren is a columnist for the Ottawa Citizen. *Used with permission*

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Prayer

A model prayer

[More and more churches are asking someone other than the preacher to deliver the congregational prayer. It's not an easy task, as I've learned from experience. But having a few models to follow is helpful. Peter Rhebergen's prayer struck me as a beautiful, well-structured example, and we reprint it here in the hope that it will inspire others to compose similar vidid and concrete prayers.
Editor]

Our God, who reigns over all from heaven,
we thank you for your presence among us here on planet earth.

We have asked for your continued blessings
upon all that grows and lives in this, your marvelous creation.

You give us health, and restore us to good health
when our bodies begin to fail, that we might
enjoy a good walk with our children,
an early morning run with the dog,
a peaceful evening canoe paddle on the lake or down the river,
and the joys of riding a bicycle to work,
of cycling along the highways of British Columbia,
in our vast and varied Canada.

We then listen to the songs of birds,
crows and roosters most prominently.

We note the smells of the different manures
as farmers tend to their flocks and crops,
spreading the winter wastes of chickens and sheep
as treasures returned to the earth.
And so our soils are renewed for another season of gardening.

We feel the warmth, the sometimes scorching heat of the sun;
our beans germinate, tomatoes ripen; our solar panels are delighted.

We feel the cool breezes, and struggle against the mighty headwinds;
our wind turbines rejoice as they provide us with power
to grind our grain, and operate our electrical appliances.

We feel the refreshing and sometimes drenching, chilling rain;
our water barrels and creeks are replenished to overflowing,
that we might drink of their pure, clear waters.

We see the splendid colours of a new season's birth,
from early crocuses and tulips
to fresh green leaves and blossoming fruit.

Our spirits, and profits, soar as we share with friends and neighbours
our bedding plants and perennials,
our hanging baskets and bouquets of flowers;
thank you for plant worlds, nurseries, and farmers' markets.

In so many ways we taste and enjoy the beauties of your earth.
Make us, oh God, worthy stewards.

*****

We have asked for your ongoing, urgent blessings upon humanity,
upon us, the people on this earth,
and our many human activities.

Although we so readily and recklessly abuse, misuse,
and squander your blessings,
we now humbly acknowledge our failures
by highlighting your faithfulness.

We thank you for organizations such as Citizens for Public Justice
that strive to bring social justice to the poor, to immigrants,
to First Nations Peoples, to the unborn, disabled, and elderly.

We give thanks for local citizens who try to ensure
that molybdenum and methane mines
are developed in a responsible manner, so that our backyard mountain
and the Sacred Headwaters of our rivers
may be preserved for your glory and our survival.

We give thanks for the many fine medical services
we receive in our northern communities,
for doctors who come to see us,
and for transportation that we might see them.

We thank you for our schools and universities
and all who serve to open up to others
the wonders and needs of your world.

The music, art, drama, photography which we have in good measure
here in Bulkley Valley are gifts that we may enjoy and develop.
Thank you for the fine arts.

Our list could go on forever, for so great are your mercies towards us.

Accept, we pray, our thoughts of thanksgiving.
May peace on earth bring joy to all, here and beyond.

We pray in Jesus' name, **Amen.**

This prayer was written Sunday morning, 2008 May 25, by Peter Rhebergen.
Mr. Rhebergen is a Christian school teacher and a passionate advocate for social justice and earth care.

Stewardship

Time for stronger action on farmland preservation

Rick DeGraaf

Maybe it's time to re-think the process for preserving farmland in Ontario. Maybe it's time we learn from Quebec's approach!

Consider what our neighbours in Quebec did to preserve farmland with the introduction of Bill 23. The whole province below the 50th parallel was declared an agriculture preserve. When the bill took effect, even the city of Montreal had to appeal for a 'non-conforming' use. The city had to apply to a special tribunal set up for that purpose – the Commission de protection du territoire agricole du Québec. Quebec ensured that they put an agency in place with the 'teeth' to act.

In Ontario, in contrast, a tension has developed in many regions through the implementation of the Greenbelt and the push to expand it. On two occasions I had the privilege of presenting a brief to Brant Regional Council as it wrestled with the proposed criteria and listened to delegations from developers, homeowners, farm organizations and other land resource preservation activists like myself. I appreciated the democratic process and honour those who have been elected, yet I also felt the tension even within the audience and the mayor and his council.

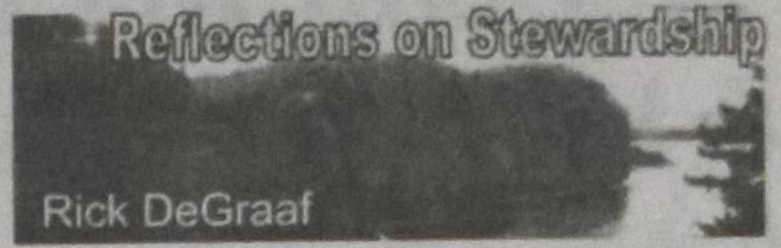
From the CFFO perspective, we believe all Class 1, 2 and 3 land needs to be zoned for agriculture – period! The exceptions need to be as few as possible. In some areas of the province we would even argue for a further expansion of the classification beyond the top 3. In today's scene of increasing grain prices and declining oil reserves, the pressure is on for agriculture to provide food and energy – and that takes land.

We should consider declaring all land in Ontario as Greenbelt. Trying to resolve piecemeal at the municipal level who's in or out of the Greenbelt isn't the way to go. It results in sharp distinctions in property values that are hard for people to stomach. Such an approach would require that all non-agricultural activity obtain permission for a non-conforming use. Let alternative land use for factories, secondary industry, housing etc. be relegated to land of less value to farming and so protect our land resource. Let us use our land classification system to guide our planning.

Quebec did it to preserve their agricultural sovereignty. In Ontario, we should do likewise. We cannot depend on the boats from Brazil or anywhere else to supply our needs.

Rick DeGraaf is a director on the Executive Board of the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario and a chicken producer. The CFFO Commentary is heard weekly on CFCO Chatham, CKNX Wingham and CHOK Sarnia, Ontario and is archived on the CFFO website: www.christianfarmers.org/index.html. CFFO is supported by 4,200 farm families across Ontario.

Tight-fisted stewardship



Sometimes I wonder if we take the stewardship of our "stuff" too seriously. We become overprotective and maybe even selfish with the assets that have been entrusted to us by God (some will say *they* have earned it). It reminds me of a character in the parable of the talents – the servant who stakes out a secret place and digs a hole to bury some money.

Someone I know is very generous with his large 11-passenger van. Whenever the youth of his church are planning to go on "Serve" project anywhere in North America – frequently it is his van that takes them there. There's risk involved, yet, it seems year after year his van is 'serving' somewhere. On rare occasions he goes along too – but most of the time his van goes without him! And so far it has always come back without incident. When I ask him about the risk, he accepts it and says – "I couldn't find a more satisfying use for that vehicle". God has blessed him and he in turn blesses ministry.

Going back to the parable of the talents…. The master entrusts his servants with various large sums of money in keeping with what he thinks each one is capable of handling responsibly. To the listeners of the day, a talent was worth a lot of money (the NIV footnote says it's worth at least $1000). The parable, as recorded for us, doesn't tell us whether the master gave any prior instructions to his servants. When he returns we learn that the master was looking for a return, much like any employer in business needs to make money on the work of the employees he hires. Whether instructed or not, I do think that all three servants saw this as a test of their 'stewardship'. The servants who were entrusted with five and two talents did not hesitate, and decided to put their money to work. They made plans and invested their capital (put it at risk) in order to get a return. They modeled the pattern of their master who (according to the servant with the one talent) was a shrewd business manager. However, the servant with the one talent wasn't going to take a chance on losing the money, so he hoarded it and kept it in a secret place – not even trusting the bankers.

God invested in Noah, in Abraham, in Israel and still invests in Christians today. In the same way God invests in us and has entrusted us with the keys to the kingdom. God continues to enable and resource us if we but seek first his Kingdom. However, too often I see us as tightfisted – clinging to our assets too tightly – not willing to take risks. We take on the posture of the one-talented servant and are not willing to risk what God has entrusted to us for his Kingdom purposes. We place our security too much on the 'created stuff' and not enough on the faithful provision of the Creator – and we excuse ourselves by saying we have to be responsible!

The one-talented servant was afraid of what might happen if he loses the master's money. Doing business, investing money and investing in people is risky. In kingdom ministry it's about investing in relationships with believers and non-believers alike, and that is risky. Yet, it is something we must do – with God's help. Like the master who went away (he wasn't available for consultation – no cell phones!) Jesus also left. Like the master, we know Jesus will return again and that there will be a day of reckoning. However, there is one key and important difference between the parable and us: we are not left alone. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit. He is like an internal 'cell phone'. With the Holy Spirit's guidance we can risk – lending that van to a 'Serve' team; inviting strangers into our homes; investing time in relationships with non-believers – and much more.

Let's be responsible yet willing to risk assets for God's great Kingdom enterprise. Find ways of investing yourself and your assets in the Kingdom. Avoid burying too much into your home, fancy vacations and in large financial investment portfolios that tie up resources that could have been used for the Kingdom now. Trust that God will bless your efforts when you invest your time, talents and treasures in his Kingdom enterprise.

Stewardly tip: Loosen up. It helps to know that all we have is God's. We want to be responsible, but I must also be willing to follow the inclination or spiritual nod to do something or give something – not just excuse it away as irresponsible or undeserving to the person you might help. Better to risk an act of kindness than not – when the 'spirit' nudges you.

Readers: Share your 'Stewardly tips' so that we all can make better use of the resources God has entrusted to us. Submit your suggestions (by mail to *Christian Courier* or by email to my address below) and provide your contact information so that we can acknowledge your contribution or ask you for more details.

Next issue: Tithing & generous giving

Rick DeGraaf works for Christian Stewardship Services in Markham, Ontario Rick's email: rickd@csservices.ca

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Church

'Reclaiming Anglicanism'

A leading evangelical bishop on what's happening, and why

Marian Van Til, *with files from CT*

(SYDNEY, Australia) – Peter Jensen, Anglican Archbishop of Sydney leads one of the most evangelical branches of global Anglicanism in the Western world. On becoming archbishop in 2001he called on all "Bible-based" churches to reach 10 per cent of Sydney's 4.2 million people with the gospel by 2012.

The efforts begun in 2001 resulted in the planting of 60 new congregations and a 30 per cent increase in candidates for Anglican ministry at a time when Christian growth in Australia had been dropping steadily.

Jensen was the primary organizer of the 1,000 theologically conservative Anglicans from around the world to assemble in Jerusalem for GAFCON, the Global Anglican Futures Conference.

The event, which began June 22, was planned quickly after leading conservative bishops announced that they would not attend the Lambeth Conference, the once-a-decade gathering of the 900 or so Anglican bishops worldwide. Many conservatives pulled out of Lambeth in the ongoing dispute over homosexual ordination and same-sex blessings, and fundamentally, over a different view of Scripture than that held by the majority of Western Anglican church leaders.

'We believe in transformation'

Just before GAFCON Archbishop Jensen told *Christianity Today* why this alternative gathering is important. "Two great events have occurred," he said. "One is that liberalism in our Anglican Church has manifested itself in such a powerful way in the area of human sexuality. The intention is to export this new teaching right through the Anglican world. Second, as a response, Anglicans around the world have crossed boundaries and have provided protection and care and hope for orthodox people caught up in liberal **diocese**. That has changed the shape of Anglicanism. What GAFCON is trying to say is: How are we going to live with this? What changes now need to be made in order for us to be able to live in a church that has changed its shape?"

Jensen asserted that GAFCON is not just a conference but a movement, and one whose "emphasis has been on truth and transformation." He noted that there is a "very strong evangelical strain" in the movement. "We believe the Truth, that we have access to truth in Scripture, and we believe in transformation. We believe that people's lives can be changed. Our interest is not so much in human sexuality as such, but our interest is in that gospel of Jesus Christ, the truth that transforms, and the impact of that gospel in the whole world."

'How deeply do you adhere to the Scriptures?'

Another strong emphasis of GAFCON, said Jensen, is "listening to God, getting together, listening to what God is saying to us, discerning the mind of God, naturally, through the Scriptures, but as they apply to today." Jensen said he wouldn't be surprised if the movement were to gain "sufficient institutional reality to make it a new force within the Anglican Communion." He explained that. "I don't hear much interest in breaking up the Communion or splitting it or dividing it further than it is divided. What I hear is the idea of a new force embracing orthodoxy and empowering people to serve the gospel of truth and transformation."

Jensen noted that the problems facing Christians who are committed to adhering to seven-day-a week faith based on transformative biblical truth are trans-denominational. At some point evangelicals in every denomination where they exist may well be forced to decide "whether their denomination comes first or whether their adherence to the gospel comes first." It's a question of "how deeply do you adhere to the Scriptures and how deeply do you adhere to the truthful and transforming gospel? Now this great struggle is occurring within the denominations because of very powerful secularizing tendencies throughout the Western world. Even though people may live in largely evangelical denominations or even in independent churches, they will find that there's no place to hide," said Jensen. "Your children will feel this more sharply than you will."

The nature of human nature

When asked what the "optimal biblical and Christian response" should be to someone struggling with homosexuality Jensen replied, "Evangelicals have been caught intellectually flat-footed in the whole area of human sexuality and indeed of human relations. I think we need to trace this back further to the rise of feminists and to relatively inadequate responses of evangelicals in this area.

"Our problems are not so much to do with homosexuality; they're to do with human nature, human relationships, and the call of the gospel to sacrifice. We have a different view of human nature than that of the world around us. We have a different view as to what constitutes the good life. It's in those areas that the battle needed to be fought first before we ever got to the human sexuality battle."

Jensen notes that many Christians are now saying, "Sorry, what we Christians say as normal, the rest of the world thinks is absolutely impossible and extraordinary. Hence, when we say we call upon people, whether homosexual or heterosexual, to live a life of self-discipline outside marriage, people around us, the world around us, thinks this is some of the most extraordinary stuff they've ever heard. Well, it's only what all Christians used to believe, and it's what the Bible teaches."

Worldwide Day of Fasting and Prayer for North Korea set for July 27

Marian Van Til, *with files from Open Doors*

The Worldwide Day of Fasting and Prayer for North Korea, planned for July 27, is a call to Christians worldwide for repentance, fasting, and intercession for the nation of North Korea. July 27 is the 55th anniversary of the Korean War armistice and creation of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The DMZ is the border area that divides North and South Korea and is the most heavily armed border in the world.

The prayer and fasting day has been organized by the Global Justice Prayer Network and Open Doors. The Prayer Network's motto is "With faith in Christ for the healing of the nations."

They "earnestly ask all churches, ministries, and individuals worldwide to intercede and mobilize intercession for North Korea as we look to our Lord Jesus Christ with hope."

Open Doors, which was begun by Brother Andrew as a Bible smuggling operation during the height of the Cold War, is now a worldwide ministry that distributes Bibles and Christian literature, provides leadership training and assistance, Christian community development and organizes ongoing "prayer/presence/advocacy" for persecuted Christians around the globe.

Prayers of the righteous powerful and effective

There are numerous issues related to North Korea about which participants in the July 27 day are asked to fast and pray. Among them:

1. For the setting free of captives.

It is estmiated there are from 200,000 to as many as one million North Koreans, including women and children, being held in political concentration camps. Hundreds of thousands have already died in these camps.

2. For human rights.

Please pray for the restoration of human rights to all North Koreans, specifically handicapped persons, children, women, the elderly, and the 40 percent of the population that are considered part of the "hostile class"; those who are mercilessly persecuted because they or their relatives are believed to be critical of or are considered a blemish to the North Korean regime. All Christian families are classified as hostile. Please pray for justice, freedom, healing, and abundant life for all of the oppressed of North Korea.

3. For the starving.

North Korea has been devastated by famine in the last 10 years. This is a humanitarian emergency affecting millions: the government deliberately starves those considered to be part of the "hostile class" believed to be critical of the North Korean regime. International food aid has been diverted to the ruling party and the military. Please pray for sufficient food to reach those who are starving, breakthroughs for Christian aid workers to reach the poorest communities, for all starving persons to be restored to health, and for an end to the famine.

4. For North Korean children.

Large numbers of children are orphans because their parents have been killed. Most orphans are homeless, starving and living on their own in dangerous circumstances. The tragedy and suffering they have endured is inestimable. Please pray for all North Korean children to be saved from the powers of darkness; that God would bring about a great deliverance so that this entire generation will live, have hope and a future and know his love, and for each of these children to be completely healed through the power of Jesus Christ.

5. For refugees.

Thousands of North Koreans have fled to China to escape persecution and starvation. If caught by the Chinese police, they are forcibly repatriated back to North Korea where they face imprisonment or execution. And right now, before the Olympics in Beijing, the Chinese government is more vigilant than ever about hunting down refugees.

Many refugees not caught become victims of human trafficking and other horrific crimes in China. Please pray for the welfare of all North Korean refugees, for God's divine protection and deliverance, that the Chinese government will stop forcing North Korean refugees to return to North Korea; for human trafficking and abuses against North Koreans to end, and for North Korean refugees to find peace, hope, and abundant life through the power of Jesus Christ.

6. For freedom and spiritual awakening.

The majority of people in North Korea have never heard the Word of God, or heard the name of Jesus Christ. They are forced to worship Kim Jong Il and his deceased father, Kim Il Sung as gods. Christianity is seen as the greatest threat to the North Korean regime. In 2005, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom reported that "there are virtually no personal freedoms in North Korea and no protection for universal human rights." Please pray for the walls of idolatry to utterly collapse and for new and godly government, for God to raise up Christian leaders within North Korea, and for freedom and spiritual awakening to know the Truth for all North Korean people.

7. For the future of the North Korean church.

The relatively small number of North

North Korea *cont. on p. 9*

CRC Synod summary

As CC's June 23 issue went to press we called attention to important items that were then being discussed, or would be discussed, during the annual general synod of the Christian Reformed Church which met from June 14-20. Below we include news from Synod 2008 not covered in the last issue.

The Back to God Hour gets a name change

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. – The Back to God Hour began almost 70 years ago in Chicago as "the radio ministry of the Christian Reformed Church." For many years it was the church's one and only "media" outreach. But with the production of television and video programs and media ministries in a handful of languages other than English and across the world, that has long since changed.

The name change is small but significant. The church's media outreach will now be known as Back to God Ministries International.

Rev. Robert Heerspink, Back to God director, said the change would bring the name better in line with the work they do around the world on behalf of the CRC. The identification of the whole ministry with the single English-language broadcast that began as a one-hour radio program has "impeded the agency's ability to communicate its full mission and vision," Heerspink said. Synod agreed.

There was no question of getting rid of the "Back to God" part of the name. "'Back to God' speaks of our commitment to discipleship and evangelism," said Heerpsink. "Our mission and vision are not changed, but we need to communicate in a better and stronger way who we are and what we do."

Synod asked for input on 'faith formation'

The denomination's "Faith Formation Committee" is studying the biblical teaching and current pastoral practices relating to participation in the Lord's Supper, public profession of faith and infant baptism.

Having begun its work only recently, the committee brought no recommendations to Synod 2008. Instead, it asked for help. During a special luncheon, delegates were asked to discuss their church's practices of the Communion and Profession of Faith with their tablemates and provide written feedback. "It was a neat opportunity to share some thoughts that might not have been considered," said Rev. Mike Miedema, of Classis Eastern Canada. "My wife and I have a child with special needs," he added. "[Our son] has said on numerous occasions, 'I love Jesus.' Do we say he needs to have complete theological understanding of what's taking place at the table, or at what point do we say, 'This is Jesus's expression of love back to you?'"

The Faith Formation Committee has launched a Web site <www.crcna.org/faithformation>. By the end of the summer the committee plans to build a network of 50 correspondents across the denomination to formulate clear statements, guidelines, educational materials and pastoral advice on inter-generational faith formation and the practice of the sacraments.

Synod 2008 was the first of five consecutive synods to which the team will report. During those years it hopes to produce much more than just a document.

Abuse prevention training required

Synod directed Christian Reformed congregations to hold at least one hour of abuse prevention training each year. "[Our intent] is that it's a small step in the right direction," said Ed Visser, reporter for the committee which suggested the training.

Of the 1,057 CRC congregations in North America, 552 have adopted a "child safety policy," according to Beth Swagman, director of Abuse Prevention for the denomination.

Synod adviser Kathy Vander Grift said, "I think it's time to raise some kind of accountability that churches actually do take these steps, because otherwise they become empty promises." She expressed concern that the decision might not actually hold churches accountable.

Later in the week the report of the Abuse Victim Task Force came before synod but was sent back for refinement. Synod's advisory committee on abuse concluded: "There are issues that need more clarification (such as, but not limited to: insurance issues, legal language, legal representation, more focus on healing, relationship of ecclesiastical process and judicial review, and at what point restorative justice can be implemented.)"

One point asserted by the report is that congregations have a moral responsibility to cover expenses a person incurs when abused by a church leader. The report also asked for the expansion of the role victim advocates play in the process that follows allegations of abuse.

Synod 2008 asked the Board of Trustees of the Christian Reformed Church to bring a revised version of the report back to Synod 2010.

In a separate action, synod decided not to accept an overture from Classis B.C. North-West. That classis had asked synod to include in rules and guidelines the right to legal counsel for both alleged abusers and victims at all stages of the process. "We should grant the right to due process and ask every person who is involved in one of these cases if they would like legal counsel. Justice is at stake here," said Rev. Pieter Sinia, who spoke on behalf of Classis B.C. North-West. But other delegates cautioned against making the process "too legalistic."

Because of the significance of abuse and abuse allegations within a congregation, the denomination is being asked to strengthen step-by- step procedures that should be used when responding to specific allegations of abuse.

Still pain – but more sensitivity – over 'women in office'

Synod voted to discontinue the specific appointment of female advisers to synod, since women now participate as delegates. It was noted that worship services during synod should be planned to "show sensitivity for both views held in the denomination on women in office," including the serving of Communion.

Delegates walked a fine line between the two poles of the issue. As they wrestled with a proposal to end the practice of appointing women as advisers, they struck out wording that said synod was "rejoicing..., thankful for the women delegates present this year and trusting that [the church] will continue along this path...."

From the other end of the spectrum some delegates would have liked to establish a threshold number of women delegates. If the delegate threshold were not reached, additional women would be appointed as advisers – as is the practice with ethnic advisers.

It's not easy to trust that significant numbers of women delegates will be sent to synod every year, said Rev. Joan De Vries, Classis Toronto. "I want you to hear my pain also as you have heard the pain of those who spoke on the other side."

Delegates did not respond very specifically to an overture from Classis Minnkota asking that only men serve communion at synod's worship services. Synod voted to "instruct the executive director and the convening church of synod to show sensitivity for both views held in the denomination," as they plan the service and communion. Some delegates said that peoples' consciences were offended by the service on Sunday when they were served communion by female elders.

"The consciences of many ... who hold to the traditional view are troubled," said Rev. George Koopmans of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan. "I believe this recommendation is sensitive to the consciences of many."

"It's sad for me to sit here and listen to this [discussion]," said Rev. Ronald Chu, Classis California South. "We bind each other so we have to watch what we do and what we say.... It's sad that we don't give each other the grace, understanding and wisdom to say 'That's okay.'"

Mary Lynn Vanden Berg appointed sem prof

Synod 2008 approved the appointment of Mary Lynn Vanden Berg to a position as assistant professor of systematic theology at Calvin Seminary. "Teaching is what I love to do," Vanden Berg told delegates in a public interview. "It's exciting for me to think about forming students for ministry, and how I can help them see and articulate better their understanding of God."

"My students will tell you that I always ask the 'So what?' question," she said. "When I teach a concept, no matter how abstract it might seem, I try to give my students an idea of why it's helpful for ministry, for understanding God, and for moving through life.... My kids have taught me that if it doesn't touch them in some way, what good is it?"

Asked by one pastor delegate about her lack of pastoral experience, Vanden Berg replied, "Yes, it's a bit of a handicap – I don't know what your shoes are like, exactly. But I grew up in a pastor's house, and I've been involved in practically every volunteer opportunity there is in the church...."

Vanden Berg has a Bachelor of Science degree from Calvin College, and a Master of Theological Studies degree from Calvin Seminary. She is completing a PhD on atonement and its effect on the renewal of creation.

Synod urges government action to resolve Zimbabwe crisis

After hearing from fraternal delegate Dr. Kobus Gerber of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa about the growing crisis in Zimbabwe, Synod 2008 passed a resolution urging the governments of Canada, the United States and South Africa – and church leaders across Africa and North America – to take emergency diplomatic action.

The resolution said that the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America "notes with growing alarm the rapidly deteriorating human security situation in Zimbabwe – particularly the sharp increase in officially sanctioned attacks on churches and the arrest of church leaders – and urges the governments of Canada and the United States to take emergency diplomatic action to resolve this crisis and avoid the violence and bloodshed that threatens to engulf Zimbabwe."

Synod instructed the CRC's Board of Trustees to "quickly communicate this resolution to the appropriate government officials in the U.S. and Canada, to the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, church leaders in Zimbabwe, the members of the CRCNA, and other bodies or institutions who should be aware of our views."

The above reports were provided by the CRC Office of Communications and were modified and edited by Marian Van Til.

North Korea *continued*

Koreans who are Christians have routinely suffered torture and execution for their faith; they are widely regarded as the most persecuted believers in the world. Yet in the midst of such persecution, they display faithfulness and love for God that is extraordinary. Some North Korean refugees after converting to Christianity in China decide to return to North Korea in order to spread the Gospel. Please pray for God's protection and deliverance for all North Korean Christians, for the North Korean Church to grow and increase in numbers that all North Koreans worldwide be saved, for God's great destiny and plan for North Korean believers to now come to fulfillment and that the nations would be transformed by their witness.

Nature

Flowers & Thistles
Curt Gesch

To celebrate Earth Day… I cut down a tree

It had been irritating me for quite some time, sending out roots to sap my garden soil's nutrition and my patience, and now it was threatening to drop dead branches just where I was planning to put a new outbuilding.

So I cut it down. Not exactly the whole Amazon rain forest, but a cottonwood tree that had sent down roots for fifty years or thereabouts.

Then I wrote a sermon about living close to the earth, "possessing" or "inheriting" the land, based upon a repeated phrase from Psalm 37.

My daughter learned how to use the chain saw and helped buck up the log, and transport it for firewood. In two years it would feel light as, er, cotton, but now it was heavy and wet. When I drove in the splitting maul, the wood spit back at me, perhaps Tree's last act of revenge. It would giving off lots of ash and a minimum of heat, and almost no creosote. Tree would become – if not the best firewood – at least very dry firewood, just right for quick hot fires in October or March

And it would be our firewood. Wood that had grown on our soil, laughed at our attempts to rid the soil of its roots, provided perches for goshawks eyeing our chickens, a location for the robins' second nest each year, temporary roosts for crows, ravens, and grosbeaks. It was our Tree that we cut down, a restaurant of sorts for chickadees, nuthatches, downy and hairy woodpeckers, innumerable warblers during migration.

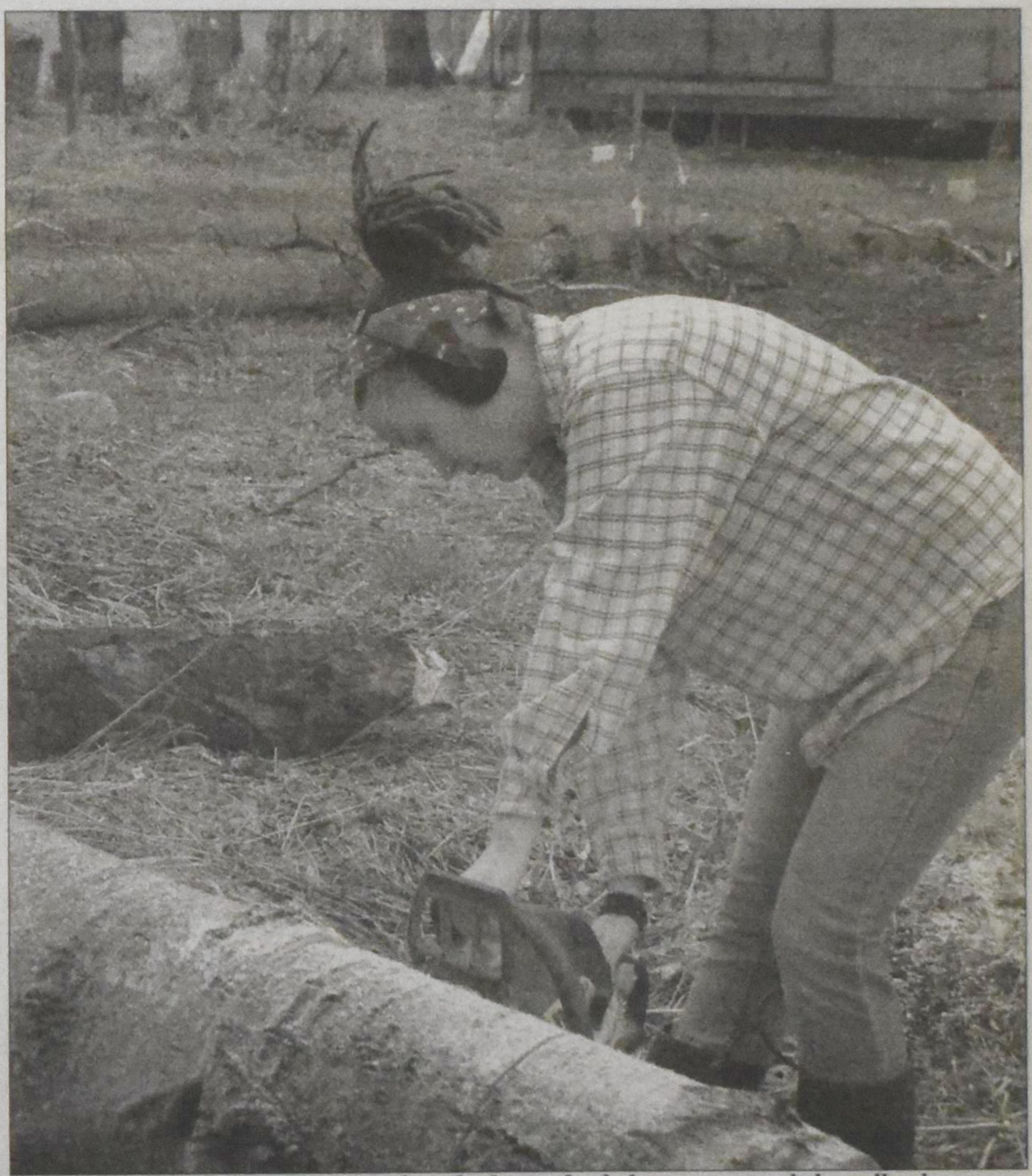
We piled up Tree's branches to make brushpile #2 behind the chicken coop at the base of the ridge. Like brushpile #1 (Christian Courier, January 7, 2008, "Brushpiles: Recycling for wildlife") the brushpile will be a home, a retreat centre, a snack bar, and theme park for all sorts of wildlife. Tree will leave a sort of legacy, you might say. I named this brushpile after Mike, our new son-in-law (it was either that, endow an art museum in his name, or supply a down payment on a house).

Tree will not leave any biological "children" behind. Not if we can help it. We plan to be merciless to root suckers, knowing the tenacity of an old root system. But Tree has, you might say, left adopted heirs. A year or so before Tree's demise, we had planted four spruce seedlings and even an American elm. (Although the area we inhabit abounds in Dutchmen, they have left their elm diseases elsewhere). Perhaps Tree's decaying leaves, roots, sawdust made by the chainsaw, and rotting root system will help nourish replacement Trees.

And to ameliorate any knothole loss from Tree's dead branches, a new birdhouse, suitable for bluebirds, tree swallows or chickadees is now available for occupancy near the old stump. I named this birdhouse after Mike's new wife, Rachel Gesch Eyers.

*****

Compensation for cottonwood: a brushpile (I named it Mike)



Becca Gesch cuts cottonwood with the aid of chainsaw and dreadlocks

To celebrate earth day this year, I cut down a tree. By cutting, using, replacing, working, sweating, resting, and appreciating both the complexity of life and its transitoriness, I've been trying to live on and in this land the Lord our God has given us.

To see the new earth, the one the meek will inherit, revealed in the land we "possess" now: that was my goal for earth day, for earth year, for life on this earth.

Lord, give me the patience of a cottonwood,
the tenacity of its root system,
the hospitality it offers to your creatures.

Curt Gesch is a retired school teacher who will un-retire in the fall, the Lord willing.

Above, where Christ is

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ,
set your hearts on things above,
where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.
Colossians 3:1

Our Lord God is a fountain overflowing with all good things. If you confess this, and really mean it, you've got it made!

Nothing but good things come from him, and originate with him. And because we only receive good things we must never complain about them, but rather we must give thanks in all things. If you cannot give thanks, the fault does not lie with God, but with you. Your vision is impaired, because you cannot see what is truly good. He is the fountain of all good things.

Therefore there is no good thing but it flows forth from him. Whatever there may be in yourself or in your child that is *not* from him, it is *not* good, it is sinful, no matter how beautiful it may appear on the surface. In the same way, when there is something truly good in yourself or your child, it did not come from you, nor from your child, but it has come to you and yours from the ever-flowing fountain of all good things. This leaves no room for pride, or self-righteousness. We are re-created in Jesus Christ to do good works, which God foreordained, so that we may walk in his ways and give thanks for his gifts. [Ephesians 1:10]. When we do something good, the old self in us quickly wants to take credit, but the new self moved by the Spirit says, "It was the work of God in me".

Of all good things God is the fountain, the gushing well, the mother lode. It is not for you to claim that the good you did was acquired from the Lord after much pleading and effort. Rather, just as water gushes forth from an Artesian well, without any effort in hauling it up, so do good works arise in us from a good and generous God who supplies all these things. You have not initiated anything, but it is God who motivates you by his all-sufficient love.

The Lord is the very abundant fountain of all these good things. Faith can never expect too much. No matter how much you have received, there is always more coming your way. The supply is inexhaustible. No matter how great the need you may have to be saturated with 'good', or even if you have received more than you could imagine, the well continues to overflow with all good. That is why all who recognize this truth *'have got it made'*. That means, you have gotten rid of the pernicious weeds of your self-willed flesh; you have become pure, rich and free as a child of God, and he will re-form you into new life.

Briefly stated, what then are those 'good things' which flow from that fountain? Everything that contributes to his glory and the salvation of your soul.

Does this exclude our daily bread, and the fruit of our labour which we enjoy?

Not at all! Why should it? As long as it is not the only thing we always strive for. If your money, possessions and the fruit of your labour distract from your focus on God, they are no longer 'good things'; it would be better for you to starve to death, if that would bring you back to God.

The good things that flow from the fountain are good for your whole person, body and soul. Nor are they perishable temporary goods, but a lasting treasure. So, in fact, those events in your life that you regard as temptations and evil, will prove to be for your good and therefore for thanksgiving.

The good things that flow from this fountain include all that grants escape from eternal death, and leads you to eternal life. Grace flows from this fountain, and the riches of grace takes on many forms like satisfaction and righteousness, reconciliation and sanctification, and a myriad of favours received from your God.

Every warning of your conscience flows from that fountain; every remorse after sin; every tear of true repentance; every instance of childlike penitence. From this fountain flows every encouragement of love, all relief of anxiety, and all comfort for fear and distress.

From that fountain flows every word of warning, every corrective voice, every urging to love, everything that might keep you from sinning and call you back to your Lord.

From that fountain flows every kernel of faith, every work of the Holy Spirit, and every repentance of the heart; all things, in short, that might lead you to become a child of God.

To put it bluntly, there has never ever been the smallest spark of pure upright love welling up in your heart, unless it was given to you from the Father. Never did the robe of humility suit you so well, unless it was put on you by Christ. So, if ever there was anything beautiful or lovely in you for which you could receive praise from God, it was because the Father of all light gave it to you, so that it could shine through you.

The right way ought to be clear by now. Should you strive to become more holy, humble, loving or tender, do not look to the barren depths of your own heart, for it cannot be the source of these things. If it is those 'good things' that you earnestly seek, then you should no longer look for the things that are below, but for what is above. But make sure that you really do look 'above' and know that there you will find the true source of all good things that come to you.

When the Holy Spirit tells you to, "seek the things that are above" [Col 3:2] it means that you are drawn and pulled toward the pure gold and true beauty of the heavenly Jerusalem. And it means even more! It also means that you are not to strive for gold or pleasure or honour among people, but that you must long for good works, love, purity, for all that is lovely and beautiful, not in the eyes of men, but for God. It also means that you must earnestly desire to bear your burdens with joy if they come your way, so you may truthfully appear before the Lord with a good conscience.

All that is lovely and pure does not grow in the soil of your own heart, but is sent down to us from heaven. Love is born there. When at last the silent prayer of the apostle is heard that the peace of God may fill you completely, then you will know that God's peace is a precious gift, coming from the fountain of all good, cascading down to you.

We still have not exhausted the text. So far we have talked about 'good things above', but we have to add, 'above, *where Christ is'*. This represents a most precious addition to the text, yet in no way does it imply that for Christians all good things flow not from the fountain, but from Christ himself. In that case Christ would replace God in our hearts, and our saviour would become the giver of all good. We must not even dwell on that for a moment. The eternal and blessed Being, who is God, is and remains the Fountain of all good things for all times, for all, and thus also for us.

At the same time, all the waters that flow from that Fountain are gathered up by Jesus Christ to be given to us. Just as surely as our soul is united with one Lord, so also the refreshing gifts of those waters will be ours in abundance. We never need to doubt that.

They come to us from the Eternal One, through Christ the Mediator. If you seek love in order that you can love others, you have but to look to Christ Jesus, to whom has been given all good things for you from his Father.

If you want kindness, self denial, humility, then seek these things from above where Christ is, for in him they are stored up for you. Not as common treasures, but as gifts stored away just for you.

He does not use a generic seal, but one made-to-measure just for you with your own initials engraved on it. The robe of righteousness stored up for you, is custom-made for you in heaven.

Note: *This is part of a series of meditations by* ***Abraham Kuyper*** *translated by Jack van Meggelen.*

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Sermon

Why so we dress our daughters like skanks?

Rev. Stanley J. Groothof

Scripture: Romans 12:1-2

While the title of my message may be a bit provocative, I admit up front that it is not original. The January first 2007 edition of *Maclean's* had a cover story with the same title in which author Lianne George explored how clothing companies are influencing girls to look sexy at younger and younger ages. Ms. George talks about how "the definitions of *girl* and *woman* have become moving targets…. North American retailers like La Senza Girl, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Limited Too sell fishnet stockings, skinny jeans, message panties and padded 'bralettes' in micro-sizes."

Young girls buy this stuff up because it's popular in at least some peer groups. But they're also wearing this because their parents either are fighting too many other "commercially-created battles with their children" to object to this one, or because their parents themselves are wearing the adult versions of this provocative children's wear. This leads Ms. George to conclude: "…Girls, looking the way they look, are only aping [or, imitating] grown women, which serves to remind us of the turmoil and confusion surrounding what we currently believe a woman should be."

I would expand that last line to say that there is turmoil and confusion surrounding what we currently believe a *person* should be. The problem of provocative, even inappropriate clothing is not limited to women and girls. The often humorous columnist Dave Barry not too long ago asked the question, "Can [teen guys] wear their pants any lower? The waistbands are now approximately at knee level. Where will this trend end? The shins? The feet? Will young people eventually detach themselves from their pants altogether and just drag them along behind them?' "

Modest about modesty

What Dave Barry expresses with humour touches on a deeper problem within our culture and also within the church – our church even. Provocative, inappropriate clothing is a problem of immodesty, a topic the Bible addresses in a few places, which also makes it a spiritual problem.

At first it may be surprising, but of course, God should be concerned about what we wear. Taking on a very Reformed expression, one author writes how "there is 'not a square inch' of our lives – including our closets – with which God is not concerned."[1]

We don't hear the word *modesty* much anymore. When we do, it's often in a condescending tone – *Oh, don't be so modest* – as though modesty makes a person unable to appreciate the good things about him- or herself. It seems to be a foreign concept altogether in a culture where the mantra is *Show off what you've got*, whether it's the content of your intellect or the contours of your body.

Into this context, we resuscitate the word *modesty*. According to my research, "modesty means propriety. It means avoiding clothes and adornment that are extravagant or sexually enticing. *Modesty is humility expressed in dress.* It's a desire to serve others, [women] particularly [serving] men, by not promoting or provoking sensuality. *Immodesty*, then, is much more than wearing a short skirt or low-cut top; it the act of drawing undue attention to yourself. It *is pride, on display by what you wear.*"[2] …And it's what many voices in our culture influence us to be.

Living sacrifices, transformed

I picked as our Scripture reading Romans 12:1 & 2 as a reminder then that our first frame of reference, our first allegiance, our first concern is not to our culture and its distorted values when it comes to modesty.

The apostle Paul urges us "to offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God…" (12:1a). Before we can go any further, we hear that God is concerned with what we do with our bodies. "…Paul's plea is for each of us to put our whole selves into our relationship with God…. We cannot be Christians merely intellectually; rather, we must respond to God's love by loving him with our words and attitudes, our emotions and actions."[3]

We are able to respond to God's love in the first place because of Jesus. He is the one who brings us from spiritual death to life, hence Paul's emphasis on our bodies being *living* sacrifices. We offer ourselves as people who have been raised from death to life by the One who conquered death on the cross, proving with the resurrection that life is stronger than death.

So, desiring to live in the life of Christ, we dedicate our hearts, our minds, and (indeed) our bodies to God's glory and to the encouragement of the church. "This," says Paul, "is [our] spiritual act of worship" (12:1b). Worship isn't just what we do here Sunday mornings for a couple hours; we worship God all week long when we seek to put him first, when we seek to honour and glorify him with our hearts, minds and bodies – "not ignorantly, like animals brought to slaughter," notes one commentary writer on Romans, "but intelligently and willingly…. Worship is the way we live. We worship God … [when we] serve him every day, every hour, every minute."[4]

This means our first allegiance is to God. Instead of conforming to our culture, then, we allow God to "transform[us] by the renewing of [our] mind" that we may know and do "His good, pleasing and perfect will" (12:2).

What's the difference between *conforming* and *being transformed*? "Once a little boy was trying to open a flower bud. Under his persistent efforts, the blossom fell apart in his hands. In exasperation, he looked up at his mother and asked, 'Why does the bud fall apart when I try to open it, but when God opens it, the flower is beautiful?' Then he answered his own question, 'Oh, I know! When God opens a flower, he opens it from the inside.'

"That story is a charming illustration of the difference between being conformed and being transformed. The former forces someone's personhood or a group's identity from the outside. The latter opens up the individual or the community from the inside. The difference in results is dramatic. When God opens persons from the inside, they can truly be themselves, the uniquely gifted individuals they were created to be. Unfortunately, however, all sorts of influences obstruct God's opening process…."[5]

Fearfully and wonderfully made

One of those influences is a culture that tries to conform us, a culture where modesty is completely foreign, and we're encouraged to show off what we've got. No longer is the emphasis on the beauty, wonder, uniqueness, and giftedness *God* gives us; the emphasis rather is on our desire to draw attention to *ourselves* – me and (frequently) my external appearance and wardrobe.

Where does the desire to draw attention to oneself by what one wears come from? Does it come from you wanting to rebel against your parents, teachers or employer, doing the opposite of what you've been told or what's expected of you? Does it come from low self esteem, an internal insecurity that tries to hide itself in a bold outer appearance? Does it come from a desire not to be overlooked like you have been in the past, perhaps a desire to be deeply, truly loved?

Perhaps most of all, we desire to draw attention to ourselves when we forget how much attention our loving heavenly Father daily showers on us. Psalm 139:14 reminds us how we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." Out of love, God makes beautiful things – including people. Even though we are fallen, broken people, there is still a beauty about us that reflects the beauty of our Creator.

What's more, "because we are created in the image of our Creator, each of us has this [same desire and ability] to make things beautiful. That means, when we decorate our homes, or plant a lovely flower garden, or seek to add some form of beauty to our surroundings, even when we attempt to enhance our personal appearance – we are actually imitating and delighting in the works of our Great Creator."[6]

Things get messed up, though, when we believe we need to "enhance our personal appearance" to make up for a deficit, a deficit in believing God made us beautiful in the first place or an error in believing that we need to prove ourselves to others or even to God. Things get messed up when we start believing the half-truths and lies of our culture which would have us believe that our worth is directly connected with what people think about our external appearances. Suddenly the external appearance overshadows inner beauty and our good deeds done out of gratitude for God's grace.

Return to modesty

That leaves the question for both guys and girls, men and women: "What are you consumed with – your clothing or your character? What are you known for – your good looks or your good works? If you're a mother, what is your daugh-

ter learning from you in this regard? She's … studying you; as she does so, what is she learning – the latest fashions, or good deeds?"[7] That worth is found in the shallow externals our culture idolizes, or in the fact that she is a beautiful, beloved child of God? If your children are not learning this from you, I can guarantee that they are not learning it from many of the voices in our culture.

"Make this your aim," concludes author C. J. Mahaney, whose work I'm indebted to in this message, "that there be no contradiction between your Gospel message and the clothes you wear."[8] In other words, does what you wear enhance or distract peoples' ability to see what you believe? Does your external appearance harmonize with or shriek louder than what is in your heart?

This, of course, will vary from person to person and from one circumstance to another. Modest women are conscious about the amount of skin they are showing and attempt to keep covered when they bend over to guard against unnecessary attention; modest men will discern that what they wear at the beach on a hot summer day might call unnecessary attention in a shopping mall. And what looks modest on one person may be immodest on another because our bodies come in different shapes and sizes.

What we need is discernment; we need a renewal of our minds as Paul would put it. We get this through loving but honest communication between a couple brothers in Christ or a couple sisters in Christ or between brothers and sisters in Christ – being told that what we're wearing is distracting not serving to encourage each other or help us keep our thoughts pure. Sometimes we might need to be told that instead of worshipping the God of the Bible, we're worshipping the god of what's cool, what's "in." Kids need to see this, but so do adults – parents who think they need to be "cool" or "buddies" with their children, giving them minimal supervision or guidance when it comes to modesty or other influences from culture and their peers. Regardless of age, we need each other to remind us that "true beauty comes from the inside-out, not from the outside-in."[9]

We also receive discernment and renewal in our minds through reading Scripture. There are a couple places in Scripture where we hear about not being immodest, about how we should not dress. But on the positive side, there are lots of places in Scripture that describe how we *should* dress. Granted, these Scripture readings are not referring to literal clothes. However, in listening carefully to the Lord in these passages, we'll also receive guidance about dressing appropriately and less like skanks (to pick up again the title of that *Maclean's* article). And in the process, the Holy Spirit may use us to be lights in a culture where there is so much turmoil and confusion surrounding what we believe a person should be.

Conclusion

So let me close with some Scripture reminding us what dressing well truly looks like….

"It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus. You were baptized into union with Christ, and now *you are clothed*, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself." – *Galatians 3:26-27 (GNB)*

"…*Dress modestly*, with decency and propriety… with good deeds appropriate for [those] who profess to worship God." – *2 Timothy 2:9, 10*

"…*Clothe yourselves* with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." – *Romans 13:14*

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, *clothe yourselves* with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, *clothe yourselves* with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." – *Colossians 3:12-14 (NRSV)*

Having this sort of wardrobe will always be in fashion; *provocative* might no longer be the right word, but you might be surprised how noticeable (in a good way) you'll become.

This sermon was delivered by Rev. Groothof on Sunday morning, June 22, 2008 in Telkwa CRC.

Footnotes

1 C.J. Mahaney, "Modesty: God, My Heart, and Clothes (pt. 1)" (online at *www.sovereigngraceministries.org/Blog/post/Worldliness-Resisting-the-Seduction-of-a-Fallen-World-CJ-Mahaney.aspx*), ¶9. Mahaney's blog entries are excerpts from a chapter on modesty in his book *Worldliness: Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

2 C.J. Mahaney, "Modesty: The Attitude of the Modest Woman (pt. 2)" (online at *www.sovereigngraceministries.org/Blog/post/Modesty-The-Attitude-of-the-Modest-Woman-(pt-2).aspx*), ¶3-4.

3 Marva J. Dawn, *Morning by Morning: Daily Meditations from the Writings of Marva J. Dawn* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 11. The excerpts in this devotional book that explore Romans 12 are from Dawn's book, *Truly the Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 11-15.

4 Douglas J. Moo, *Romans* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 395, 397.

5 Dawn, 32.

6 C.J. Mahaney, "Modesty: The Appearance of a Modest Woman (pt. 3)" (online at *www.sovereigngraceministries.org/Blog/post/Modesty-The-Appearance-of-the-Modest-Woman-(pt-3).aspx*), ¶13.

7 C.J. Mahaney, "Modesty: The Right Adornment (pt. 6)" (online at *www.sovereigngraceministries.org/Blog/post/Modesty-The-Right-Adornment-(pt-6).aspx*), ¶15.

8 C.J. Mahaney, "Modesty: The Modest Woman's Allegiance (pt. 7)" (online at *www.sovereigngraceministries.org/Blog/post/Modesty-The-Modest-Womans-Allegiance-(pt-7).aspx*), ¶17.

9 Stephen Lien, "Risk It! Modesty in an MTV World" (online at *www.bpcusa.org/Sermons/sermon92604.pdf*), 9. On parents wanting to be "cool" or "buddies" with their children, see Ron Polinder, "Craving Coolness: The Peril of Perpetual Adolescence" (online at *nurturingfaith.wordpress.com/2008/05/27/craving-coolness-the-peril-of-perpetual-adolescence*).

Memories of father spreading fertilizer by hand

Country living
M. van der Galien

One of my earliest memories of helping my father on the farm was driving the little grey Ford tractor raking hay and putting on fertilizer. My father was a big believer in fertilizer. He used it in Holland.

When we immigrated to Canada in 1953, father bought a little farm near Eganville, Ontario (100 miles west of Ottawa). Back in those years the Dutch government would not let people who wanted to immigrate take money out of the country. They could only take a few hundred dollars. Holland was poor after the war.

So father bought Dutch made things (furniture) in Holland that he knew we could use in Canada and had them shipped over in a wooden container. He also bought a new car and had it shipped over. That was a waste of money. The first winter in Canada the car had to be fitted with snow tires and a block heater.

A few years later the Dutch government lifted the restrictions and people wanting to immigrate could take money with them and many bought good farms in Canada and elsewhere.

So father had no choice if he wanted to farm in Canada. He would have to start the hard way – put a small down payment down on a little farm and work out. That's what he did. He milked cows in an old barn and worked off the farm in the summer after the hay was off. We had a good bush and winters were spent cutting cedar posts and pulpwood.

It wasn't long before father had more cattle than the farm could feed. Putting fertilizer on the hayfields in the spring gave him extra feed for the milk cows.

But this was the 1950's. Many of the old-time farmers on our road had never used the stuff. They didn't believe in fertilizer or artificial insemination. Even though I was only a youngster at the time, I can remember neighbours scoffing at "the Hollander" for throwing money away on fertilizer.

A few years later one and then another neighbour bought a few bags of fertilizer and tried it on their hayfields. Obviously, they liked what they saw in our fields.

This spring I saw a fertilizer truck with wide tires spreading fertilizer on a worked up field. It didn't take long to complete the job. I thought about how we spread fertilizer 50 years ago.

Father liked to get fertilizer on the field before a rain and preferably in the evening when there was no wind.

We didn't use a mechanical fertilizer spreader. We used a trailer – the one we used in the bush for hauling out pulpwood. Ten or 15 bags of 10-10-10 fertilizer would be put on the front of the trailer. A smooth surface small wash tub that held a few bags was put on the back and away we went to spread fertilizer.

Father would put a big red hanky over his nose and mouth and he'd sit on his knees on the back of the trailer. My job as a nine or 10 year-old was to drive the little Ford slowly in a straight line up and down the field while he hand spread the fertilizer in long sweeping motions.

When it was time to replenish the tub he'd yell at me to stop. If there was a little wind I'd have to watch how I was driving so father didn't get white dust blowing back in his face. He'd shout to let me know he was going to turn around and spread the other way. That meant I had to drive closer to where I had just driven.

Father and I went into a partnership (after I worked off the farm for five years) and bought a good farm in 1970 consisting of two hundred and twenty acres of flat clay land near Renfrew. Two years after he died in 1977, at age 69, the farm was expanded by 200 acres with the purchase of a neighbour's farm.

Father would have been so proud knowing the farm now had over 400 acres –all in one big block. There was so much land there has never been a shortage of cattle feed. And no need to spread fertilizer on the hayfields – only cattle manure. Lots of it!

Maynard vander Galien is downsizing his farm. One field consisting of 180 acres is rented out to a cash-cropper – 40 in wheat, 40 in soybeans and 100 acres in sunflowers.

Corinthians

THE PRESENT AND THE END

Then the end will come,
when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father
after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.
I Corinthians 15:24

A.A. van Ruler

An all-encompassing, life-giving power goes out from God, a power revealed in Jesus Christ. For as all die in Adam, so shall all be made alive in Christ, says Paul in verse 22. But the Lord God doesn't do this great work of saving his creation in one fell swoop. He has divided it into stages. Each is given life in its own turn – first Christ as the firstfruits in his resurrection, and then those who belong to him at his second coming.

After this we may be expecting a third group. What did Paul have in mind? Some believe he had in mind those believers who had already died before Christ's return. Other believe he is referring to unbelievers in general. Still others believe he has in mind those who are won by him at his second coming and during his visible rule.

But Paul doesn't specify which group he has in mind. He doesn't say. Suddenly he leaps ahead in his train of thought to make his next point – "and then the end."

We may regret this leap because now we don't know how Paul envisioned the last things. We aren't told, for example about the interim rule of Christ between his return and the end, nor about the resurrection of those who don't believe in Christ. But Paul is no professor calmly laying out his views. He is an apostle brimming with energy; he can hardly keep up with the thoughts crowding into his mind, so he only touches on the high points. And we will have to be satisfied with that.

But it is important to note that there is indeed an end. This means a great deal for the way we experience life and for the way we stand in the midst of life. We become eschatologically streamlined. We acquire a doctrine of last things. We are filled with hope and expectation. Life is going somewhere, both in the small events and in the large. There is an end, and this end is not purely and simply the end; it is also a goal.

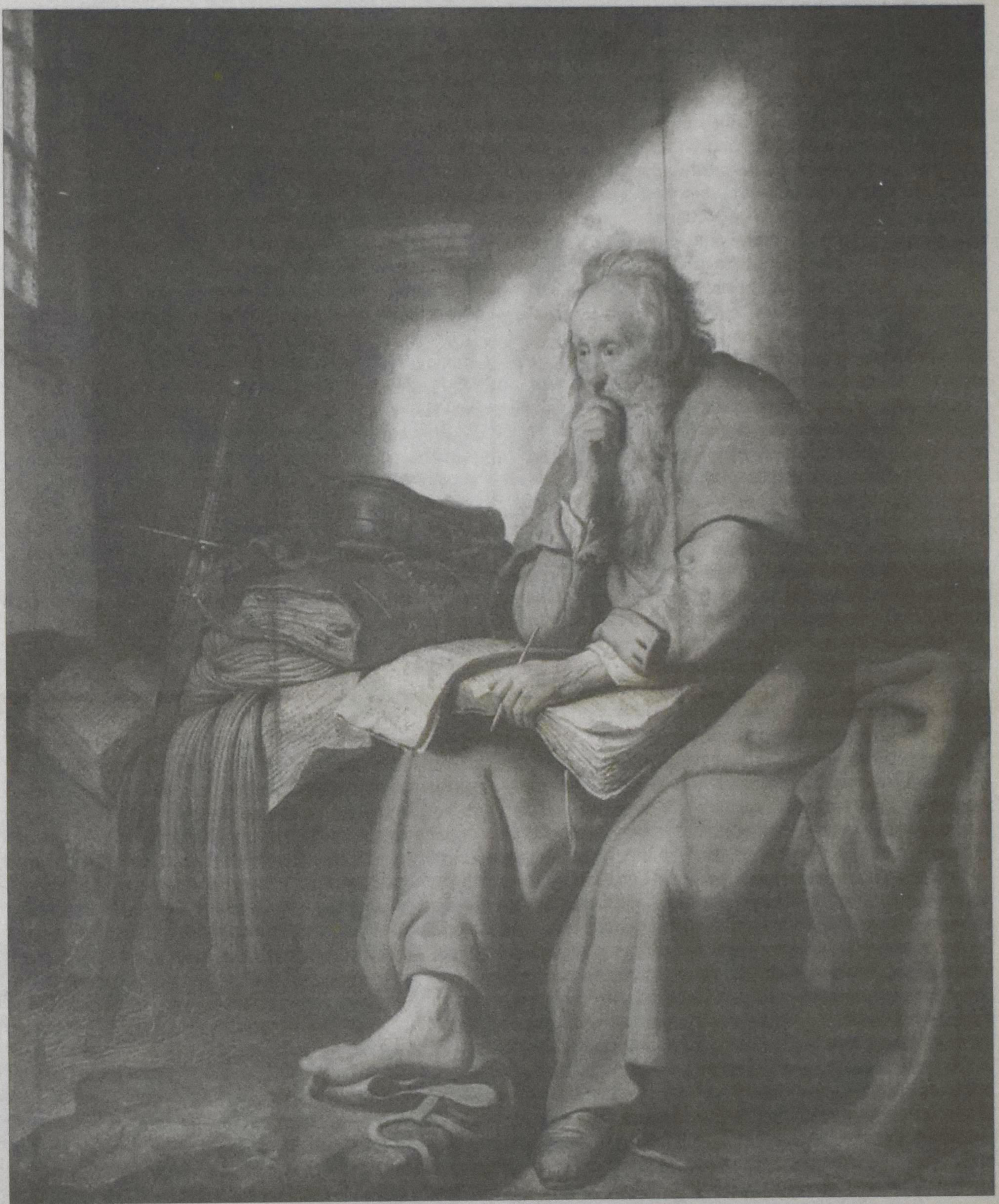
This gives life and history suspense and movement. It pushes everything toward this goal. Reality is a series of divine deeds, God's dynamic acts. In calm or storm, the living God is busy with his world and his people. But in the midst of his busyness he keeps his eye on the goal, the end. That's what he wants to reach. Everything else is done for this purpose. This orientation toward his goal connects everything together. The whole of historical reality is structured teleologically [telos means goal or end]; it derives its very nature and essence from this telos, which is both end and goal.

This, of course, means that we cannot think beyond it. The goal is truly the end. Period. It's the finish. In our thinking from the present we must respect this endpoint. So eschatology (the doctrine of last things) and eschatological expectation prepare us to live in the present.

God's great process of giving life is working. And gradually all the implications hidden in Christ's resurrection will unfold themselves.

But even this process will have an end and with it Christ's rule. In the end Christ will turn over his kingship to God the Father.

This kingship was entrusted to him. He came to do the work of God on earth and to establish his kingdom. But this divine mandate is temporary. When it has been carried out, it is finished. Then the incarnate Son will return his kingship to the Father.



Rembrandt's "Apostle Paul in Prison."

But now for a time the kingdom of God is the kingdom of Christ. In this form it has been established in the world and continues to grow. In the end, however, it stops being the kingdom of Christ and again becomes the kingdom of God.

These words of Paul reveal deep, hidden things. Christian theologians like to say that they are beyond our comprehension and that we must therefore be careful how we interpret them. But this does not mean that we must ignore them. On the contrary, to me it seems very important to take this truth – that even to Christ's kingdom there will be an end – very seriously. After all, Christ and his work are not an end in themselves, but a means. The one great goal of it all is the kingdom of God and creation wholly redeemed.

Nevertheless, we must not reach forward too hastily. Before this happens, Christ as king must dethrone all other powers and principalities in the world.

Christ is not just busy saving and giving life; he is also fighting, conquering, dethroning and destroying. Paul has in mind here the powers, including death. In God's good and beautiful world all evil must be overcome and eliminated if it is to be truly good and beautiful.

So the kingdom of Christ is not just a saving church, but also a church militant. We are now standing in the middle of it. But we must take our stand in the right way. We are called to believe in him who gives life, to hail the conqueror and to fight alongside him. God defeats the powers through and in Christ, but Christ defeats the powers in and through us.

This is the meaning of our lives – that we are soldiers of Christ and that we realize that we are fully engaged in a life and death battle against the powers that arraign themselves against God's complete rule over his creation.

A summer reminder to care for creation

Planting trees

Lisa M. Petsche

The warm, sunny weather invites us to spend as much time as possible outdoors, taking in nature with all of our senses.

Families typically enjoy activities such as gardening, visiting local parks, going to the beach, attending sporting events, picnicking, hiking, cycling, attending outdoor concerts and festivals, stargazing and vacationing in the woods or by the water.

We also enjoy the many fresh flowers, fruits and vegetables available locally, some perhaps from our own garden.

Such experiences refresh us, body and soul, and heighten our appreciation of Earth's resources. What better time to reflect upon how we can help protect these sacred treasures God has entrusted to us?

Although industry is a big offender when it comes to pollution, individuals and families also do much to harm this planet. In fact, researchers have calculated that if everyone on earth consumed as much as the average Canadian, four additional planets would be required to produce the necessary resources and absorb the waste generated. That's pretty sobering.

At a workshop I attended several years ago, Sister Paula Gonzalez, an American environmentalist, urged us to think of Earth's precious, finite resources as life support systems and practise CPR – conservation, preservation and reservation.

Critically examining our patterns of consumption – which many of us don't give much thought to – is the first step.

For instance, how much new or nearly new stuff gathers dust in our closets, garage or attic? How many cups of coffee, bottles of water and fast food meals do we buy in an average week? How much trash do we put out on garbage day, and could any of it be diverted (reused, recycled or composted)? How often do we water the lawn, wash the car or hose down the driveway? Does the air conditioner run virtually non-stop from June through September?

We can no longer deny that the way we live has a significant impact on our environment. A change in habits is in order.

Since driving motor vehicles accounts for more air pollution than any other personal activity, transportation is a good place to start. (The escalating cost of gasoline is an additional – and, sad but true, for some people necessary – motivator.)

Try reducing your family's vehicle dependence by walking, cycling, using public transit, carpooling or telecommuting more. (Bonus: you may see an improvement in your physical and mental health.) Consider, too, moving closer to where you work or working closer to where you live.

To decrease the environmental impact of your vehicle, plan ahead to combine several errands in one outing, listen to the radio for traffic reports so you can avoid congested areas, practise energy-efficient driving habits, avoid unnecessary idling (don't use drive-through services) and follow the maintenance instructions in your owner's manual. When buying a new vehicle, rethink extras like power windows and mirrors, sun roofs, etc., which all add to fuel consumption.

The following are some other eco-friendly suggestions:

- repair rather than replace;
- buy second-hand, from consignment stores, thrift shops, yard sales and classified ads;
- sell or give away anything unwanted that's still useful;
- avoid buying heavily packaged goods;
- choose products made from recycled materials;
- provide drinks in reusable or recyclable containers, rather than throwaway packaging, for picnics, day camp and sports;
- teach your children that littering is unacceptable, and be a good role model;
- research ways to improve energy efficiency within your home, and gradually implement them;
- get a composter and educate yourself on how to use it properly;
- plant a tree or a garden and share responsibility for it;
- teach your children to appreciate and respect green spaces;
- join community groups concerned about industrial pollution or development of natural areas;
- demand ecological accountability from businesses and eco-friendly policies from all levels of government.

It's part of our Christian calling to care for God's creation, and we need to do a better job.

While whatever we choose to do to preserve our planet might seem small-scale, our actions, when combined with those of others, really can make a difference.

Lisa M. Petsche is a mother of three and a freelance journalist specializing in family life.

The proposed death of the greeting 'how are you'

My window seat
Mendelt Hoekstra

I am not trying to start a revolution. I guess I am trying to stop one that shouldn't have started. How often do you hear someone say the words 'How are you' as a *greeting* and not a question? Even though I am not an English teacher, I know that 'How are you' is a question and *not* a greeting. Somehow over the years it has become acceptable to ask that question and then walk away from the answer or never expect one in the first place. When people are walking in opposite directions and the question is posed, there isn't room for a connection. Then the question is unanswerable before it is even asked. Saying 'how are you' when you only have four seconds to talk to someone doesn't make sense to me.

I understand fully that when 'How are you' is posed to me the reason I am uncomfortable with it is because it forces me to decipher if the person is actually asking me a question or just giving a simple greeting. After my wife Marisa died, when someone asked me the question, I didn't know what to say because I didn't know if they knew that I and my three children were in the midst of suffering. I usually would answer the question with, 'nice to see you' and see how the conversation went from there.

When I see my relatives from Holland we still kiss each other (three times!). I like that. There is meaning to the greeting. I just returned from my cousin's wedding in Holland and when people greet each other with three kisses it allows a real engaged encounter.

Last week I was riding my bike up a hill as another rider was coming down the same hill. I was approaching the top of the hill as he was about to make his decent down the hill and we looked at each other. Just before he was about to speed down the hill he said to me 'How are you'. I laughed. It proved to me once again that in the midst of a situation where there isn't time to answer that 'question', it is still posed. I was too tired to turn around race down the hill to try and catch him to answer him.

I would be in favour of bringing back the Holy kiss as a greeting. If one gets close enough to someone to kiss them, then I think one would be engaged enough to care. In this example, it would force us to take what we say seriously.

As a child of God, the answer to 'how are you', meant either as a question or a greeting should be: 'well'. I am well. It is well with my soul. Regardless if suffering is thick at the present time. Regardless if pain is near. Regardless if death or joy is crouching at your door. Regardless if the answer 'well' feels far away from our psyche. It is the hope and promise in which we live.

Maybe, if I have the bravado to do so, the next time someone gives me a greeting of 'how are you' with no or little time for me to answer, I will stop them and thank them for the question. Then I will proceed to tell them that I will answer their question. I will look them in the eye and give them a seven- minute monologue on how I am. And if they look surprised, I will just whisper to them, "Just kiss me next time".

Mendelt D. Hoekstra is the founder and director of the Music Therapy program at Bethesda, an organization owned and operated by the Mennonite Brethren Conference of Ontario, that supports adults with developmental possibilities. He lives in Vineland, ON with his three children.

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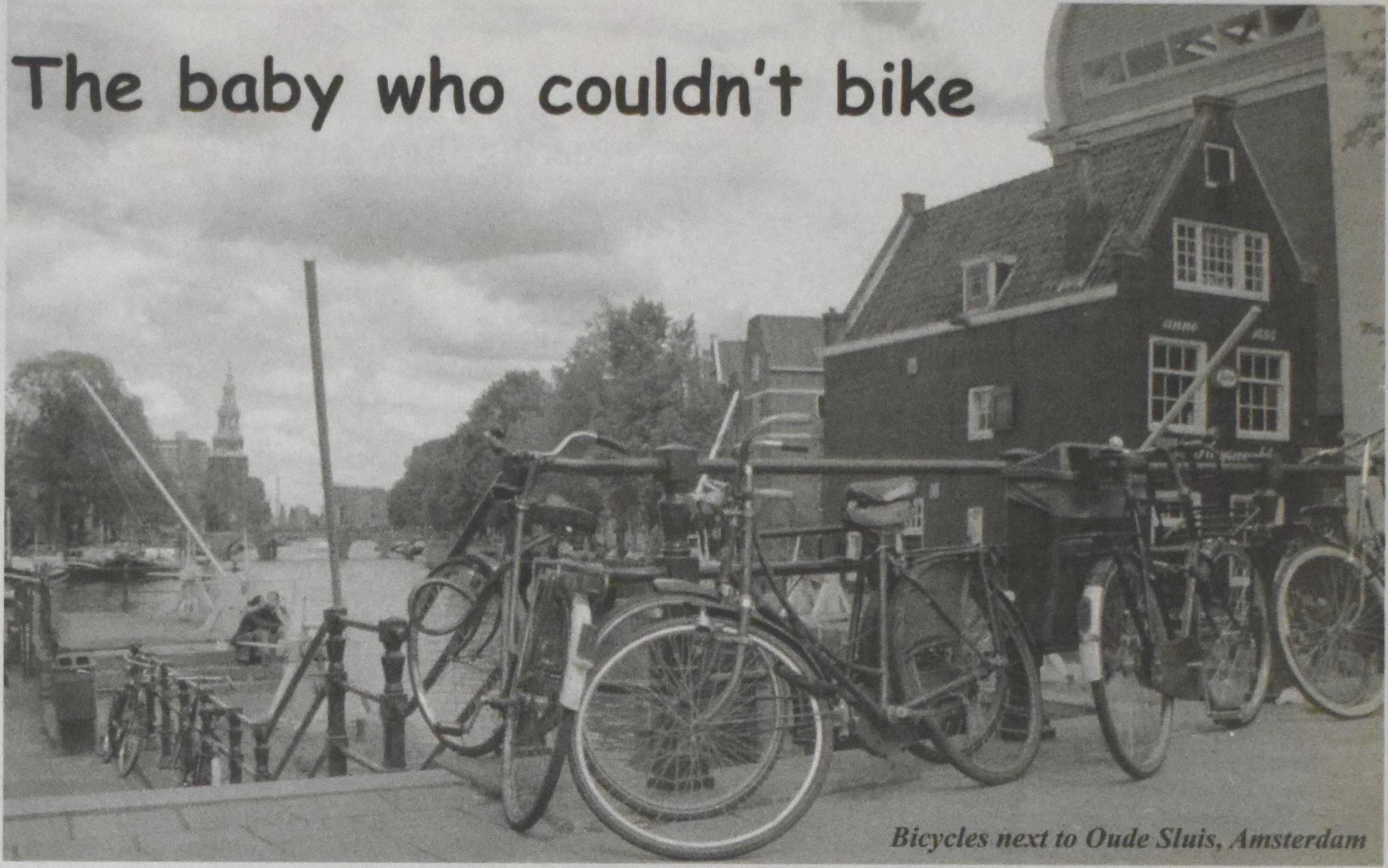
Travels

Eating my words

Angela Bick

The baby who couldn't bike



Bicycles next to Oude Sluis, Amsterdam

Like tulips and windmills, bicycles are quintessentially Dutch. In May, I spent a week in the Netherlands. Spring in Holland! Surely I, too, could pedal along the flat roads and canals featured in my father's childhood stories. There was one small hitch, however, going by the name of Alba. She's my one-year-old daughter, which made – along with my Oma and an aunt – four generations on the trip. It was, so to speak, a chance to explore my roots with one little shoot along. It quickly became clear, however, why most tourists don't tote toddlers around. For one thing, local bike stores wouldn't rent baby seats to foreigners, so I had to be content with four wheels instead. I explored Amsterdam behind handlebars, that's true – not of a bike, but a stroller.

Before we left, I dutifully read *How to Travel with Kids*. The basic problem is that babies need too much gear to make good traveling companions, and they can't carry any of it themselves. This book recommends taking one extra change of baby clothing *per hour* of your overseas flight. Furthermore, in order to prevent painfully popping eardrums, you should give your child a boiled sweet to suck on during take-off. I couldn't help wondering what awful events might make *seven* sets of clothes dirty, and whether my kid would choke to death before or after her eardrums burst.

Some people say that planes should offer two seating areas: first class and with children. Well, it turned out fine, although I'd sooner scrub every toilet on that plane than sit there holding a wakeful child on an overnight flight again. Alba thought her little bed was a climbing gym, and every passenger a dear friend. It's awkward enough knowing that your kid is keeping strangers awake; I felt worse bothering my aunt, my Oma, and the president of the ICS. He was just across the aisle, and – at about midnight – shook off his blanket, turned on the light, and read *Macleans*.

My aunt loves to joke that, upon arrival, the Dutch immigration officers looked at Alba and waved us through. It's true that she didn't have any trouble blending in with the scenery. In fact, at Zaanse Schans, two Asian tourists asked to take her photo as if she were part of the scenery. In a similar way, Amsterdam felt both strange and familiar. Once I got my bearings in the city, I strode along with more confidence than my actual knowledge warranted. Sometimes this was merely to get Alba to sleep, but my quick clip must have looked convincing, because a few people asked me for directions.

Alba and windmill

Often, they'd ask in Dutch, of course. But I grew up listening to Dutch without learning it. I could barely buy a *strippenkart* for the tram, or order *pannekoeken* in Dutch, although it wasn't too hard to catch conversational drifts. The rhythms of the language were so familiar that I felt right at home, as though every voice was saying kind things, was probably even a relative, and would offer me *boeterkoek* at any moment. Having to respond in English made me feel like the guest at a wedding feast who arrives empty-handed.

Thankfully, I could gawk in silence. The bicycles were wonderful, just as I'd imagined. My jaw dropped open in amazement more than once, bereft of words in either language. The cyclists themselves are so different from what I am used to. Bare-headed, everyone pedaled upright and with great dignity, rather than hunched over. Instead of exercise clothes, I saw men in suits with briefcases balanced on their handlebars. There were women in skirts, women in tight pants, and women with high heels and scarves. There were teenagers riding double, and more than one person pushing an empty bike alongside his own. There were children perched on little seats to the fore and aft of parents, or riding in enormous wooden boxes built over elongated cross-bars. Cycling was routine; bikes essential.

Nevertheless, our four wheels worked well enough. That buggy went over canals, in and out of buses, trams, trains, even a ferry. If there was a particularly high step, all I had to do was pause for a moment and look a bit forlorn, and someone would leap forwards and lift the buggy over the gap. When Alba and I had a disagreement about naptime, the stroller came in handy. I circled the top floor of the Van Gogh museum for a few hours, which meant that I saw all the artwork briefly but repeatedly. It was still amazing. I can also recommend having a fussy baby along if you're prone to overspending. Alba would cry whenever I stopped to examine something. If you have to keep moving, it's hard to get rid of your Euros.

The best thing about traveling with a baby is coming home, of course. When we landed, there was a painfully long delay before exiting. Alba was climbing the walls with impatience. Then through one small, round window, she saw her stroller being lifted out of the cargo hold. She made an excited, proprietary shriek.

Me? I was thinking that it was too bad we couldn't bike. And I was kind of sick of pushing that buggy, not to mention tired of carrying it up and down torturously steep, curving Dutch staircases. But I was pretty glad, nonetheless, to buckle her in that stroller one last time, and aim its wheels home.

Angela Reitsma Bick lives in Barrie, ON
Send your interesting stories or recipes to:
al_angbick@hotmail.com.

Thin dutch pancakes

Gather the following ingredients:
eggs, flour, milk and vegetable oil.

1 egg per person. Break eggs into large bowl and beat with whisk.

Add **flour** in ¼ cup increments, until you have a rather thick dough (but not a complete clump). Whisk briskly.

Add **milk**, also in ¼ cup increments, while still whisking. The dough should be quite thin, about the consistency of eggnog.

Pour about 1 tbsp. of **oil** into a large frying pan & heat on medium. Ladle pancake dough into pan, ensuring that a thin layer covers the entire base. Using a spatula, lift the pancake to see when it starts turning golden (about 1 minute). Flip pancake and cook other side until golden.

Add more oil with each successive pancake.

Serve with your favourite toppings, either sweet or savory.

This recipe comes from my friend, Maggie van der Meer. She has a few tips for the process:

- To help turn over such large, thin pancakes, get a big pan lid. Slide the pancake onto the pan lid from the frying pan (cooked side down – you're not doing any flipping yet). Then, using the pan lid, you can flip the entire pancake back into the pan to cook the other side.
- It's very important that your dough is thin enough. If not, these pancakes will end up more like traditional thick pancakes.
- Some toppings (like bacon, salmon, chopped apple, or raisins) can be mixed into the dough. Others obviously make more sense to add once the pancakes are cooked (such as syrup, applesauce or cinnamon and sugar). Cheese can be added once the pancake is beginning to set but not entirely cooked, like an omelet.

Finding spiritual green space

Rachel Boehm Van Harmelen

In the 1950s, renowned French planner Jacques Gréber proposed a "greenbelt" for Ottawa, Ontario, as part of a distinctive master plan for the national capital region. Now more than half a century later, the greenbelt is a thriving natural haven in the midst of a burgeoning urban area. The greenbelt, made up of 20,350 hectares of tranquil open lands and forests, encircles Canada's capital on the Ontario side of the mighty Ottawa River.

The concept of intentionally planning for green space in our landscapes was groundbreaking in Gréber's time, but today it has become commonplace. For city dwellers facing daily smog alerts and pressing environmental concerns, the need for green space has never been more urgent.

Now a group of pastors from New England is making the case for planning green space in our spiritual lives, too. "As cities carve out green spaces to break urban congestion, we need to help each other find green spaces in our busy lives," says Bruce Dykstra, a pastor originally from Pictou, N.S., who now serves The River Christian Reformed Church in Sutton, Massachusetts.

Where is the green space in our lives?

Last year at a regional gathering of pastors, Dykstra and five of his colleagues started talking about the role of green space in maintaining healthy physical and spiritual lives. "We asked each other, 'where is the green space in our lives?'" says Dykstra. "We discovered that we had little of it and needed to find a place to pursue it."

The pastors decided to form a peer learning group called "New England Green Space" to study and experience how green space is connected to spiritual health. Each of the pastors already had an interest in outdoor pursuits, Dykstra says. "We desired to experience this aspect of our lives together and exploring new spiritual disciplines fit naturally with the disciplined pursuit of outdoor activities."

Bryan Wiegers, treasurer of the peer group, serves a young church in Franklin, Massachusetts. Making the connection between nature and the spiritual disciplines is not a new concept, he says, especially not for Reformed Christians.

"The Belgic Confession states that we know God is real through his word and through creation," says Wiegers. "Exploring the spiritual disciplines with five pastors in the wilderness has brought God's word to the forefront in my life."

"We know him ... first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20."

-Article 2, The Belgic Confession

Excursions into Nature

The peer group – which brings together pastors from Massachusetts, Maine, and New Hampshire – meets monthly by phone to talk, pray, share, and discuss books they are reading. Every third month they plan a major excursion into nature. So far they have spent time hiking in the mountains, retreating oceanside at Martha's Vineyard (thanks to the donation of a cottage), and experiencing the solitude of the wilderness from a friend's cabin in Vermont.

In addition to reading, studying and hiking together, the pastors practice spiritual disciplines such as Bible memorization and reading, fasting, meditation, prayer, silence, and solitude. In between meetings, the pastors practice these disciplines individually. "My experiences with the disciplines has pushed me to a deeper relationship with God and I have found an excitement in seeing the others grow," says Dykstra.

Their shared experiences in green space have enriched that growth. "Our friendships are richer," Dykstra says. "We have common experiences that we can lean on and grow out of. From climbing a mountain to walking the beach, we share something that makes going deeper easier. Our conversations now go beyond the surface and deal with life-impacting issues."

Wiegers agrees that green space has enhanced his peer group learning. "There is a mystery and awe in both God's word and his creation, and being in the wilderness working on relationships and exploring the spiritual disciplines has been adventurous and exciting."

He adds that their wilderness experiences have been a keen reminder of the need to rely on God. "It is easy to think we have control," Wiegers says. "Being in the wilderness reminds us that we are not in control."

The group's upcoming plans include a camping trip in Maine and a ropes program offered by Gordon College, a Christian liberal arts institution in Massachusetts. This outdoor leadership program designs challenging obstacle courses to aid Christians in spiritual formation. During his years as youth pastor, Dykstra took students leaders through similar programs with excellent results. Learning the ropes together, Dykstra and his peers now hope to draw even closer to each other – and to God.

Just as Ottawa's greenbelt provides a haven for stressed-out city dwellers, these pastors have discovered that green space can surround them with a new level of peace and connectedness. "We are finding ways to pray and connect," says Dykstra. "We are finding that we are not alone, and the mutual accountability that pastors can have on each other is motivating."

Green Space reading list

Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transfor-mation by Ruth Haley Barton

Celebration of the Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth by Richard Foster

The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life by Tony Jones

Spiritual Formation Study Guides by Richard Peace

Spirit of the Disciplines: Under-standing How God Changes Lives by Dallas Willard

Websites:

Gordon College Outdoor Recreation Project www.gordon.edu/gorp

The Transforming Center – Caring for the Souls of Pastors and the Congregations They Service www.thetransformingcenter.org

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Reflections

Welcome to my perch

Bert Witvoet

Out of the mouth of a donkey

The Old Testament story of Balaam's donkey is a fascinating tale. (You can find it in Numbers 22: 21-35.) In our church we have started a series called "Old Testament Treasures" this summer, and, since I was asked to preach one of the sermons, I chose the story of Balaam's donkey. It's a great story, isn't it, the story of the talking donkey.

As you probably know there are only two animals in the Bible that were able to use human language at one time: a serpent and a donkey. A serpent spoke to Eve in Paradise, and a donkey carried on a conversation with her master, the prophet Balaam, some time during the trek of the Israelites through the kingdom of Moab. There are similarities between those two events. In both instances, the animals are smarter than the humans they talk to. The serpent outwits Eve about what it means to eat the forbidden fruit. The donkey is aware of a danger her master fails to see. Another similarity is that both animals stand in the service of a higher power.

But there are also significant differences between the two stories. The serpent is the mouthpiece of Satan, while the donkey is the mouthpiece of God. The serpent tells lies; the donkey tells the truth. The serpent is the downfall of Adam and Eve; the donkey saves the life of her master Balaam.

Serious argument with an animal

I will not spend too much time trying to convince you that Balaam's donkey could talk. One young person wrote in a blog: "All animals can talk, we just don't understand them." Well, that's one way of looking at it. Maybe Balaam, being a prophet, knows that all animals can talk, and maybe he can understand the donkey. He does not seem to be the least bit surprised that his donkey talks to him. He carries on a spirited conversation with the donkey as if he is accustomed to talking with the beast. He *argues* with the donkey, for Pete's sake.

But before he argues with the donkey, he beats him three times. That's called domestic violence, folks, or cruelty to animals. We should report Balaam to the humane society. Balaam is angry because the donkey is keeping him from his lucrative appointment. The King of Moab, Balak, has offered him a huge reward. All he has to do is curse the Israelites who are passing through Moab on the way to the Promised Land. God strictly forbade Balaam to curse his people. But Balaam is literally hell bent on trying to comply with the King's demands.

Balaam's embarrassment

It's the donkey who starts the conversation: "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" Balaam replies by accusing the donkey of making a fool of him! What a mean donkey!

The donkey comes back with a convincing argument: "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" Come on, Balaam, let's be reasonable. Can't you see my point? It's interesting to examine the way the donkey talks to Balaam. The donkey is identified as a female donkey. One commentator says that the donkey speaks with a female voice. It's a soft and gentle voice. It does not strike back in anger. Hmmm, I wonder. Does that tone and that gentle question make it a female voice? Is that how women usually deal with conflict? I'm just asking a question.

Well, the donkey also simply asks a question, after having been beaten three times. "What have I done to you?" she asks her master. Balaam argues back in anger, "You have made a fool of me. If I had a sword in my hand I would kill you right now." He's right, in a way. The donkey has made a fool of him. Here is Balaam accompanied by high officials who were sent by the king because Balaam has the power to curse people. He's a hot-shot prophet who is needed to protect the land of Moab. And right now he can't even control his own donkey. No wonder Balaam is upset.

Balaam's ass braying in front of the angel *by Rembrandt c.1622*

Pieter Pieterszoon Lastman – Balaam's Donkey

God's longsuffering

But the donkey, unfazed by his master's violent temper, calmly replies: "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

At this point the gentle voice of the donkey penetrates the wall of anger put up by Balaam. He sheepishly admits that the donkey is right. Has the donkey ever behaved like this before? "No," admits Balaam. "You've always been a good donkey." At this point Balaam realizes that his ass is wise, and that he himself is an ass.

We must realize that this gentle voice of the donkey is, in fact, the voice of God. It's not so much a female voice. It's a voice we should recognize as being God's voice. It's the voice of the longsuffering, patient, loving God who quietly reminds us that he's not in the habit of causing us harm or pain. I can imagine God saying to us some times, "What have I done to you that you are angry with me?" Oh, you say, but when I'm angry, I'm not angry with God! Yes you are. Whenever you are angry without just cause you put into question God's providence, God's faithfulness, God's tender mercies and God's loving care.

I would venture to say that in the past week most of us have been angry with God at least once. At least once you were angry without just cause. If you were angry because someone was not nice to you that is not a just cause. Your anger was not intended to promote greater justice, to advance God's kingdom. But if last month you were angry because the Order of Canada was awarded to Dr. Henry Morgentaler *that* would be a just cause. Your anger would have been motivated by your desire to advance the Kingdom of God. Dr. Morgentaler is like the prophet Balaam. He does not see the Angel of the Lord with a sword in his hand. He is hell-bent on putting a curse on the unborn. And the unborn might well cry out, like the donkey, "Are we not your own? What have we done that you decided to cut off our lives?

Rembrandt's mastery

I looked up Rembrandt's portrayal of this event in a painting entitled "*Balaam's ass braying in front of the angel.* Hmmm, "*braying* in front of the angel"? That sounds like a secular interpretation of what was in reality an intervention by God. I'm sure that Rembrandt did not give his painting that title. He would have acknowledged that Balaam's ass was *talking* in front of the angel." Rembrandt knew and believed his Bible. He chose the most dramatic and critical point in the story – he portrays the third and last encounter with the Angel of God. The donkey cannot go forward. The road is totally blocked. So she lies down, refusing to go further. Balaam is furious. He is embarrassed as two high officials look scornfully at how this important prophet cannot even control his donkey. How can *he* save the people of Moab? Balaam does not like looking foolish. Notice how Rembrandt dresses him in rich Eastern finery with flowing garments and a turban. Rembrandt often does that to characters who think too highly of themselves. Balaam thinks of himself as "a somebody," deserving of the greatest respect.

Balaam wished he had a sword in his hand so he could

Business Directory

kill this stubborn donkey. In the meantime, he is unaware of the Angel of the Lord who stands poised to kill *him* with a sword. Such irony! The only one who can see the angel is the donkey. She turns to Balaam and disarms him with her simple and innocent question, "Have I ever disobeyed you before?" This is the turning point, the climax of the story.

If Rembrandt's painting were a slide show, the next slide would see Balaam's stick lowered, his head turned toward the angel because the Lord opened his eyes so he could see the danger he was in. Balaam would be portrayed as humbling himself before the Lord, willing to obey God and forego his reward.

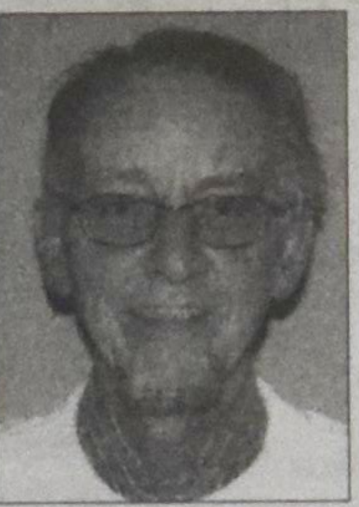
The moment of truth

Rembrandt's characters are grouped together in one mass of balanced action and strong tension. Compare this painting to the painting on the same topic by Pieter Lastman, one of Rembrandt's teachers, and you can see the difference clearly. Lastman's portrayal does not pack the same psychological and emotional punch that Rembrandt's painting does. Lastman's painting lacks the tight grouping and the swirling movement of lines in Rembrandt's picture. There is little tension. Both painters, however, chose the same precise moment of the story. It's likely that Rembrandt was familiar with his teacher's rendition.

Both the angel and Balaam are raising a weapon and are ready to strike. Who will break the tension? The donkey is the only one who can break the tension and save the situation. This is the critical moment. The donkey turns her head and, with a gentle question, she brings salvation to Balaam and to the people of Israel. She brings salvation to Balaam because he was about to literally lose his head. She brought salvation to Israel because Balaam was on his way to curse the people of Israel. God knew what lived in his heart, and God also knew that whomever Balaam would curse would be cursed, and whomever Balaam would bless would be blessed. Of course, God could have prevented Balaam from carrying out his disobedience in a thousand ways, but he chose a lowly female donkey to bring Balaam to his senses … temporarily (the following chapters tell how Balaam tried to get even with the Israelites by having them seduced into idolatry and adultery).

The problem with Balaam was that he was motivated by greed and pride to obstruct the coming of the Kingdom. The question we should ask ourselves today is "To what extent do we further the coming of the Kingdom?" or "To what extent do we try to hinder its coming?" What is it in our lives that gets in the way of God's plan of redemption? Are we aware that the Angel of the Lord sometimes blocks our way?

By the way, the title of my sermon was: "Do you see what the donkey sees?"



Bert Witvoet is the former editor of CC, now retired, who stays active by editing the Christian Educators Journal *and preaching the occasional sermon. He tries to stay informed by hearing and reading the daily news and Reformed by looking for writers and speakers who can tell the forest from the trees.*

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ELIM Village

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Anniversaries

1958 – August 16 – 2008

With thanks and praise to God

Lloyd and Karin Burghart

hope to celebrate their
50th Wedding Anniversary on August 16.

Open House on
Saturday, August 9 from 2-4 p.m.
Jubilee Fellowship Christian Reformed Church
13 Wilholme Drive, St. Catharines ON
Best wishes only, please.

Home address: 13-159 Canboro Rd, Fonthill ON L0S 1E5

Brazil 1958 August 6 Canada 2008

With great joy and thankfulness to our Lord,
we are happy to announce the
50th Wedding Anniversary
of our dear parents

Gerrit and Patricia Wassink (Dijkstra)

We praise God for his faithfulness all these years,
And may he continue to bless you both.

With love: Didi & Harry van Klaveren, *Sarnia, ON*
Johan & Wendy Wassink, *Cambridge, ON*
Fred & Trish Wassink, *London, ON*
Ingrid & Fred Johnston, *Owen Sound, ON*
Dianne & John VanRooyen, *Tecumseh, ON*
18 grandchildren

Family and Friends are invited to an
Open House on Saturday August 2, 2008 from 2-4 p.m.
at Living Hope CRC, *Sarnia, ON*

Home address: 31 Micheal Snow Ct, Sarnia ON N7W 1B8

God has granted

Jack and Ann Hoekstra

50 years of marriage
July 25,1958 - July 25-2008
Although there has been
deep earthly pain and sorrow;
we live for God's Everlasting Joy!
Love, your family and your many dear friends!

Jack and Ann reside in Chatham, Ontario.

Edmonton 1958 Listowel 2008

*My eye will be upon you...*Psalm 32:8b

The children of

Ralph and Audrey Brus

warmly invite you to
an **Open House** celebration
in honour of our parents'
50th Wedding Anniversary

August 15, 2008 at
Bethel CRC, Listowel ON
from 2:00-4:00 in the afternoon
with a Liturgy of Thanksgiving at 3:00 p.m.

Your presence is our present!

John & Grace Brus, *London, ON*
Randall, Jody & Shawn
Helen & John Greydanus, *Listowel, ON*
Richard, Michelle & Clarence, Jason & Kara (Jakob), Stephen, Jeffrey, Kristen
Wilma & Kevin van der Leek, *Surrey, BC*
Ethan, Caleb & Katya
Bernie & Arlene Brus, *Ariss, ON*
Ashley
Gerald Brus, *Listowel, ON*
Elaine & Tim Beaman, *London, ON*
Carissa, Lynae, Matthew

Correspondence: 725 Wallace Ave S
Listowel ON N4W 3S8

45th Wedding Anniversary

It is with great love
and pride that
we congratulate you on
your very special day.

Martin and Alice Kaldeway

were married
August 3, 1963 at
Bethel Christian
Reformed Church in
Brockville, Ontario.

All our love &
best wishes from
Mom (Grace Sliekers),
the kids:
John & Jennifer,
Ingrid & Andrew,
Scott & Judy;
and the grandkids:
Emmalin, Alexander,
Sarah, Jasmine,
Hannah, Maddy,
Calvin & Maaike.

May God continue to
bless you with love,
health and happiness
for years to come.

Address:
1011 Aspen Drive
Brockville ON K6V 7G2

Obituaries

St. Annaparochie, Friesland Brampton, ON
August 7, 1923 June 23, 2008

After a brief illness, the Lord took to himself our dear husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather

Cornelis (Cor) Vander Ploeg

in his 85th year.

Predeceased in 1997 by his wife of 49 years,
Rinske Vander Ploeg (Walburg).

Lovingly missed by:
Diane & Leo Gallant, *Marmora, ON*
Rick & Sue (Cassandra), Lisa & Steve (Tyler, Jaxon), Leanne & Phil
Stan & Sheila Vander Ploeg, *Grand Valley, ON*
Tammy & Nad (Isabelle, Kate), Brian & Miriam (James), Steve
Andy & Anne Vander Ploeg, *Cambridge, ON*
Mike, Dan & Victoria (Caleb), Melinda & Sean, Jennifer
Jackie & John Nawrocky, *Hamilton, ON*
Michael, Laura, Kevin
Annette & Brian Voogd, *Burford, ON*
David
John & Heidi Vander Ploeg, *Aylmer, ON*
Kaitlyn, Matthew, Owen
Joanne & Wil Saarloos, *Aylmer, ON*
Rayna, Kara, Jarrad, Mickayla, Janae
Christine & John Westerhoek, *Richmond Hill, ON*
Rachel, Jonathan, Hannah

Our father was blessed to have found love again later in life and will be greatly missed by his wife Grada Vander Ploeg (Dennis) and family:

Spencer & Arlene Dennis, *Bramalea, ON*
Matthew, Mitchell
Lowell & Diane Dennis, *Cupar, SK*
Sara, Paul
Mark & Tracey Dennis, *Welland, ON*
Ashley, Sarah & Paul (Wyatt), Shaune, Mark

On June 27, 2008, Rev. Herman Praamsma officiated at both a funeral service at Ward Funeral Home, Brampton, ON and a Memorial Service at Holland Christian Homes in Brampton, ON.

Correspondence addresses:
Grada Vander Ploeg, 501 - 35 King Knoll Dr
Brampton ON L6Y 5G5
John Vander Ploeg, 62 Tarry Parkway
Aylmer ON N5H 3H8

- - Psalm 121 - -

Theodore Plantinga

Entered into eternal rest peacefully
at home in Dundas, Ontario
on Friday, July 4, 2008,
at the age of 61.
Born on May 27, 1947, in Ee,
Friesland, The Netherlands.

One of the founding faculty members of Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario.

Beloved husband of Janet Plantinga, father of David Plantinga of Austin, Texas; Michael & Tamara Plantinga of Denver, Colorado; Abigail & Jeremy Byle of Winnipeg, Manitoba; stepfather of Ian Russell, Stuart Russell, Jennifer Russell, Kyle Russell, and Pamela Russell; grandfather of Steven Plantinga. Dear brother to Nellie & Bill Kramer of Smithville, Ontario; Don & Evonne Plantinga of Dexter, Michigan; Irene Riewald of Kelowna, British Columbia; Ed & Eileen Plantinga of Hamilton, Ontario; Marion & Douwe Spriensma of St. Albert, Alberta; and Rick & Joan Plantinga of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Predeceased by his first wife of 34 years Mary Plantinga; his daughter Elisabeth; his parents, Folkert & Anje Plantinga; and his parents-in-law, Dr. Edward & Mrs. Clazina Masselink.

Theo became Redeemer's first professor of philosophy in 1982. He taught in (and chaired) the Department of Philosophy ever since then – an unbroken span of twenty-six years. He has written numerous books, articles, addresses and reviews on philosophy, apologetics, memory, the problem of evil, Christian education, and reading the Bible as history. He has also translated into English numerous books by Dutch authors, including the philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd; Dr. Plantinga became managing editor of the Dooyeweerd Centre at Redeemer in 2005.

A statement issued by Redeemer said: For more than a quarter century, Theo Plantinga served our Lord faithfully through Redeemer University College in his teaching, scholarship and research. Especially in the early days of the university, he was a force to be reckoned with in our debates on policy, institutional purpose and identity, pedagogy and a host of other topics. He had a lively wit, a vibrant faith, a ready laugh, a listening ear and a particular fondness for the eccentric. He will be greatly missed as a friend, colleague, teacher and mentor. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

St. Annaparochie, The Neth. Brampton, Ont.
August 7, 1923 June 23, 2008

Cornelis (Cor) Vander Ploeg

went to be with his Lord and Saviour
Beloved brother, brother-in-law and uncle of:
Janna & Jan(†) Dijkstra, *Berlikum, Neth.*
Gerrit & Elisabeth(†) Vander Ploeg, *Owen Sound, ON*
John & Ann Vander Ploeg, *Shallow Lake, ON*
Ray & Helen Vander Ploeg, *Woodstock, ON*
Dirk & Betsy Vander Ploeg, *Owen Sound, ON*
Ralph & Alice Vander Ploeg, *Shallow Lake, ON*
Nephews and Nieces

The funeral took place in Brampton, Ontario
on Friday, June 27, 2008

Classifieds

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Christian Courier is published on the second and fourth Monday of each month. Copy deadline for each issue is 9 a.m. Wednesday, 12 days prior to publication date.
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Bethel Christian Reformed Church has served as the only Reformed church presence in the Saskatoon area for more than 50 years. Currently, the congregation is excited about the new building project which will much better accommodate the needs we have. The building is on the North end of Saskatoon just off a major highway with plenty of space to grow. Our congregation is diverse in Reformed backgrounds, age groups and careers and we pray for God's continued blessing also at our new location as we work together to be His light to the world.

Saskatoon is experiencing unprecedented growth and economic opportunities. If you are interested in exploring your family's options in Saskatoon, please email the links below.

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You can call Dave van Berkel, Search Committee Chair, at 506-451-1913 or email search@FrederictonCRC.com, for more information and a church profile.

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RCHS has been blessed with growth, and now serves about 175 Grade 9 - 12 students from a broad interdenominational community. In the setting of the nation's capital, ***the mission of Redeemer is to provide a community of learning that challenges students to develop disciplined minds, hearts, and bodies according to the full measure of Jesus Christ.*** We are seeking applications from candidates with a sincere and active faith in Jesus Christ, and a passion for working in a community with the above mission.

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An information package is available upon request. Information about RCHS is presented at www.rchs.on.ca. Interested applicants may send their résumé, statement of faith, and philosophy of Christian education to **mmudde@primus.ca**.

Application deadline is 31 October 2008.

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Ability to communicate in the Dutch language is an asset.

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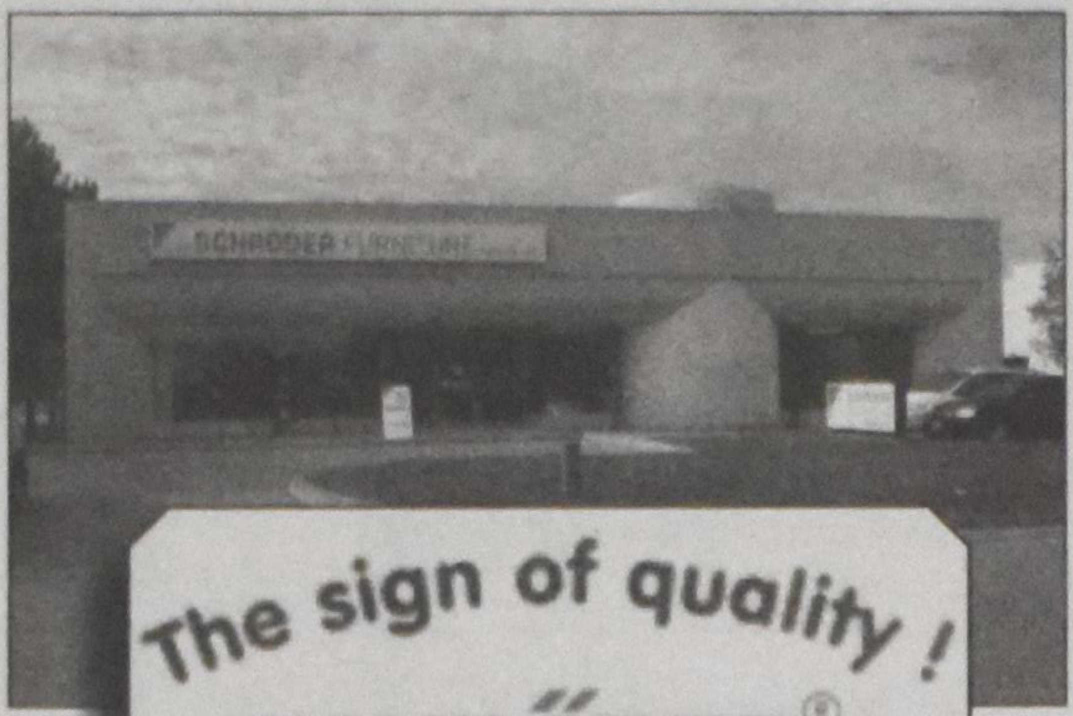

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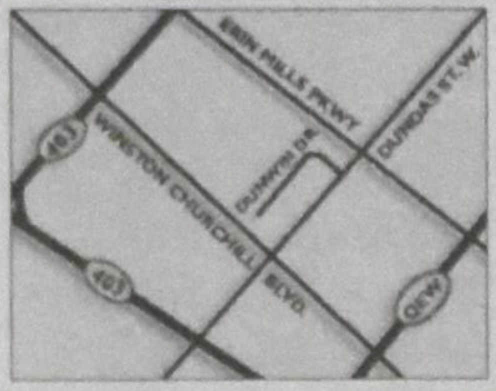

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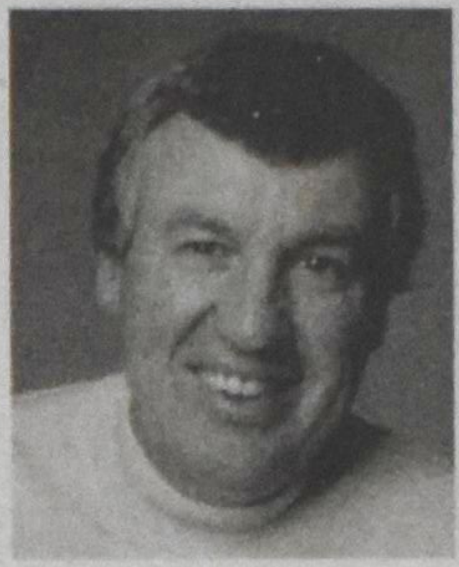

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For further information contact:

Emma Winter, Chair of the Finance Committee
1 – 905 – 563-4681

or

Darren DeCaire, Controller/Manager of Finance
12 Bartlett Avenue, Grimsby, ON L3M 4N5
1 - 905 - 945-9631

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Events/Advertising

CALENDAR OF EVENTS - 2008

Aug 17 Dutch Service will be held in the **Ancaster** Christian Reformed Church at 3:00 p.m. Rev. Ralph Koops will be preaching.

Oct 4 Get Connected partnership Banquet hosted by CRC campus ministries, Uni. of Guelph & Uni. of Waterloo/Laurier. Banquet 6:30 -9:00 at the Drayton CRC. Contact: Eve Mazereeuw emazereeuw@gmail.com or 519-827-1753 Ad to follow in upcoming issues.

Nov 8 Trillium Leaque Reunion (Ontario) If you were involved in Trillium League Youth during the years of 1975 and 1982, you are invited to reminisce & reconnect on Saturday, November 8 from 4-9 pm at Community Christian Reformed Church in **Kitchener**. Be sure to inform any former trillium leaguers. For details go to www.trilliumleaguereunion.com or email Phia (Hoogendoorn) Howes at phia@sympatico.ca or call 519-699-5942

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- Connect with Jamie VanderBerg, Campus Minister at Guelph
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Saturday, October 4, 6:30 - 9:00
Drayton Christian Reformed Church (88 Main St. E.)

Tickets – $20. Deadline – September 20.
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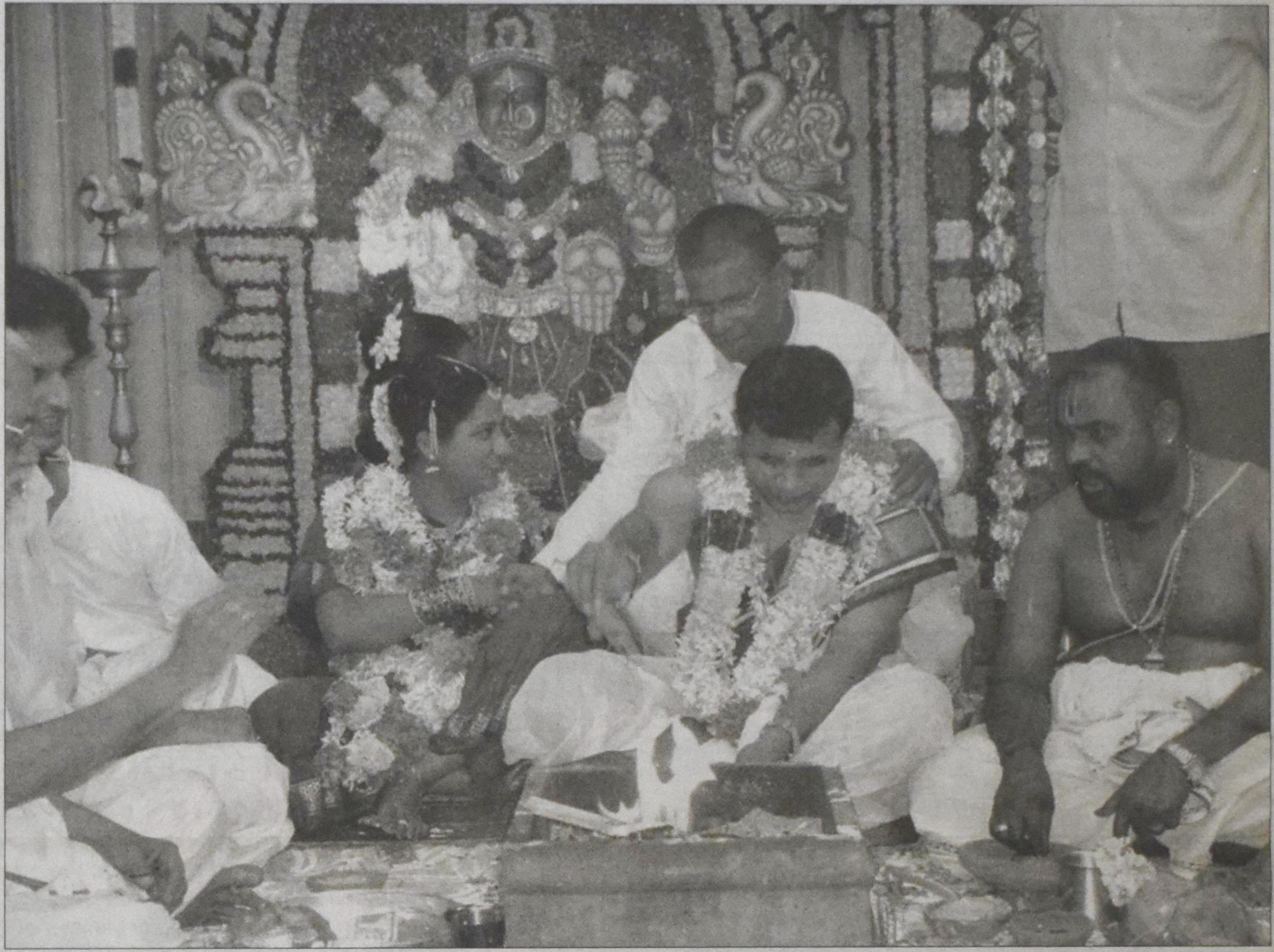
News

Canada fights wedding fraud abroad

In India, one temple had a rent-a-wedding scam to help couples get faster residency in Canada.


Hindu wedding fire-ceremony

Susan Bourette

Toronto – Shah Moayedi called the police, fearing the worst when his wife vanished. Officers turned up a telling piece of evidence of a crime: A note in his wife's handwriting, saying that she was sorry for leaving him. She said Mr. Moayedi was a nice person but she was expecting something more when she married him two months earlier in Cuba.

The crime? Marriage fraud. She used him to get into Canada.

"I thought she was my soul mate, the only person in the world for me," the Canadian airport baggage handler says today, two years after his Cuban wife left him. "But not only did she defraud the government, she defrauded me, playing with my emotions. It's humiliating."

Although the Canadian government says it keeps no figures on it, immigration officials and lawyers say foreigners are increasingly using phony marriages as a way to gain entry to Canada.

"It's epidemic," says Vancouver immigration lawyer Andrew Wlodyka. "People are using all sorts of devious tricks and it throws the whole system of immigration into disrepute."

The federal government has quietly been ramping up its training programs for immigration officials and has formed a working group to try to figure out how to crack down on sham marriages. Department of Citizenship and Immigration Minister Diane Finley returned from India six weeks ago where she investigated some of the methods used to dupe Canadian officials.

"We take marriages of convenience and fraudulent marriages very seriously," she told reporters at a news conference. "Canadians want an immigration system that helps legitimate immigrants and we plan to make sure that all immigrants to Canada are legitimate."

More than 20,000 people enter Canada as new immigrants each year in the spousal category.

The federal Tories, members of the Conservative Party of Canada, have also recently floated a controversial discussion paper to overhaul existing overseas marriage laws. Many immigration lawyers are opposed to the changes because they would result in too many genuine marriages being rejected by immigration officials. The Canadian Bar Association plans to respond to the discussion paper this week.

While the government has been loath to reveal which countries are being targeted in their ongoing investigations, immigration lawyers and concerned politicians say the vast majority of marriage fraud is being perpetrated in countries like India, Vietnam, and China.

Roy Cullen, a federal Liberal politician who represents a district outside Toronto with a large Indo-Canadian population, says he's been agitating for a crackdown for years. "I'm really only taking cues from my constituents," Mr. Cullen explains. "They are very concerned about this attack on the credibility of our immigration system and the destabilizing effect that fraudulent marriages have on their community."

Many fraud cases involve a Canadian with good intentions who sponsors a spouse in a foreign country, only to later be betrayed once the new couple arrives in Canada. But immigration officials have also noticed a surge in phony marriages in which both parties are willing conspirators.

For example, an alarm bell went off in the Canadian immigration department's New Delhi office when officials began to notice that the same guests were inexplicably turning up at different weddings in photos that had been submitted as supporting evidence for sponsoring foreign brides and grooms to Canada. Upon further investigation, immigration officers then discovered that several local Hindu temples were setting up wedding ceremonies for immigration purposes and offering "rent-a-guest" services replete with garlands and traditional wedding finery arranged by unscrupulous consultants.

Indian officials have been concerned about the rise in marriage fraud for years. In 2004, Indian police arrested a serial-matchmaker who had been duping women of large dowries after "marrying them" off to his brothers in Canada.

Just-married foreigners can enter Canada within nine months and gain permanent resident status immediately. In so doing, they are able to bypass skill requirements and queues for economic-class immigrants that can involve waits of up to six years.

Countries such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand take a more restrictive approach. In the US, for example, a foreigner marrying an American is given a "conditional resident" status for two years. Then, the couple is interviewed to determine whether the marriage is genuine and only then is the spouse granted permanent resident status.

While victims, lawyers, and officials agree something must be done to prevent sham marriages, they say there are few easy solutions.

Toronto immigration lawyer Cecil Rotenberg sees a growing number of marriage fraud victims, but worries that more government scrutiny may result in genuine marriages being rejected as fraudulent. "Sometimes immigration officers may use their Judeo-Christian values in their assessment of whether a marriage is real or not. They may not understand the cultural tradition of arranged marriages in which love comes after marriage, as people get to know each other." Good-faith marriages also fall apart, he adds.

In arranged marriages, often the couple will only meet a day or two ahead of a marriage. Without a period of courtship, it often makes it difficult for immigration officials to know whether the marriage is legitimate. If a marriage is deemed to be a fake, a visa is denied. If a spouse is already in Canada after committing marriage fraud, they may lose their permanent residency status.

Meanwhile, the Canadian government has also begun an information campaign in immigrant communities to warn sponsors that they will be on the hook financially if their new spouse flees and applies for social assistance.

For his part, Moayedi says he's discovered that his estranged wife had a boyfriend back in Cuba during their entire courtship. Moayedi says he hopes he'll find a new love soon. In the meantime, he wants to help educate other unsuspecting Canadians. "I want people ... to know that they're not the only ones out there, and we can get justice if we change the system."

Susan Bourette is a correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor